



ESTONIA

POTATOE

LET'S TALK ABOUT POTATOES!

Eating is a most common everyday practice. We eat several times a day. But our food is extremely varied. Why do we eat what we eat?

Nine museums from nine European countries, including the Estonian National Museum, have been seeking an answer to this question. Supported by the Culture Programme of the European Union, the museums have launched a project entitled "A Taste of Europe", which in January 2011 results in an exhibition about Europeans' food, its production and consumption in the past and present. The exhibition, which is mainly targeted at young people, will be on display simultaneously in all the nine countries involved in the project, and is aimed at asking questions and making the audience ponder on food from a new perspective. Besides the common European story, the exhibition speaks about one product in each country that is particularly important for this nation. Estonia is represented by **the potato**.

Already for more than 150 years the potato has been part of Estonians' diet both on everyday and festive occasions. Relieving frequent famines, the potato became our *second bread*. After the First World War Estonia held the first place in potato growing per person in the world. Estonia has also been called the potato republic.

However, after Estonia regained its independence, the former master of our tables has receded to a certain extent. Our eating habits are gradually changing, and in many cases we replace potato in our diet with rice and different pasta products.

In order to record the former meaning of the potato and the current changes in our food culture, the Estonian National Museum announced a **collecting contest** on Michaelmas 2009 under the heading "Let's talk about potatoes!". We asked people to recall everything pertaining to the potato, both "the beauty and the pain" in potato growing.

Stories and recollections about the potato were written down by professional and amateur farmers, both the potato-pickers who had been made to work in the fields and those who just liked to eat potatoes.

Estonians use the expression "hair the colour of potato-peel" to describe the plain, inconspicuous hair colour. Yet, the stories about the potato were far from plain or dull – the picture of our everyday food product in the years 2009/2010 was colourful beyond expectations.

People provided us with exciting stories about the potato throughout times. The oldest ones tell us how in the time of great-great-grandmothers distrust of the potato started to fade and the crop spread from the manor to the fields and tables of the Estonian peasant. From the Soviet time people recall, for instance, how the Estonian collective and state farms had to send potatoes even to Cuba, cleaning them before boxing one by one with a cloth. Memories about potato harvesting in the fields of collective and state farms, where schoolchildren, university students and townspeople (*patrons*) were obliged to help each autumn, are also very colourful. The students of today can hardly imagine that a new academic year could start with a few weeks' of toiling in a potato field.

Potatoes required more work than other crops; yet, they turned out to be more profitable. It became a steady source of income especially for the North-Estonian peasants. More than a hundred years ago the potato sold to manorial distilleries, and later on to distilleries and starch industries in town, bought the peasants farms for freeholds. In the 1930s seed potato growing was the promoter of many a farm.

The value of the potato was especially clearly felt in lean times. The reminiscences sent to the museum describe how the potato helped the deported people to survive in Siberia and was the main food in the hard 1940s and 1950s. These were the times when the potato became our main food product – *the first bread*. Homemade moonshine was a kind of hard currency especially in the years of the Second World War, and it “made all the crooked paths straight”. Another highlight period for the potato was the economically complicated time after Estonia had regained its independence.

The stories emphasised that the tastiest potato still comes from one's own land, be it a patch of land with a few furrows or a large field. Memories about potato growing on one's own homestead are especially nostalgic. Potato growing requires hard work; yet, a blooming potato field is fascinatingly picturesque and erases all the toil from the memory.

While today children love potato chips, then their grandmothers and grandfathers grilled potato slices on the edge of the kitchen range, considering them just as tasty. Potatoes baked in hot ashes were also favourites with children.

We are grateful to everybody who contributed to this exhibition!

