

The Columbian Exchange

Few events transformed the world like the Columbian Exchange. This global transfer of plants, animals, disease, and especially food brought together the Eastern and Western hemispheres and touched, in some way, nearly all the peoples of the world.

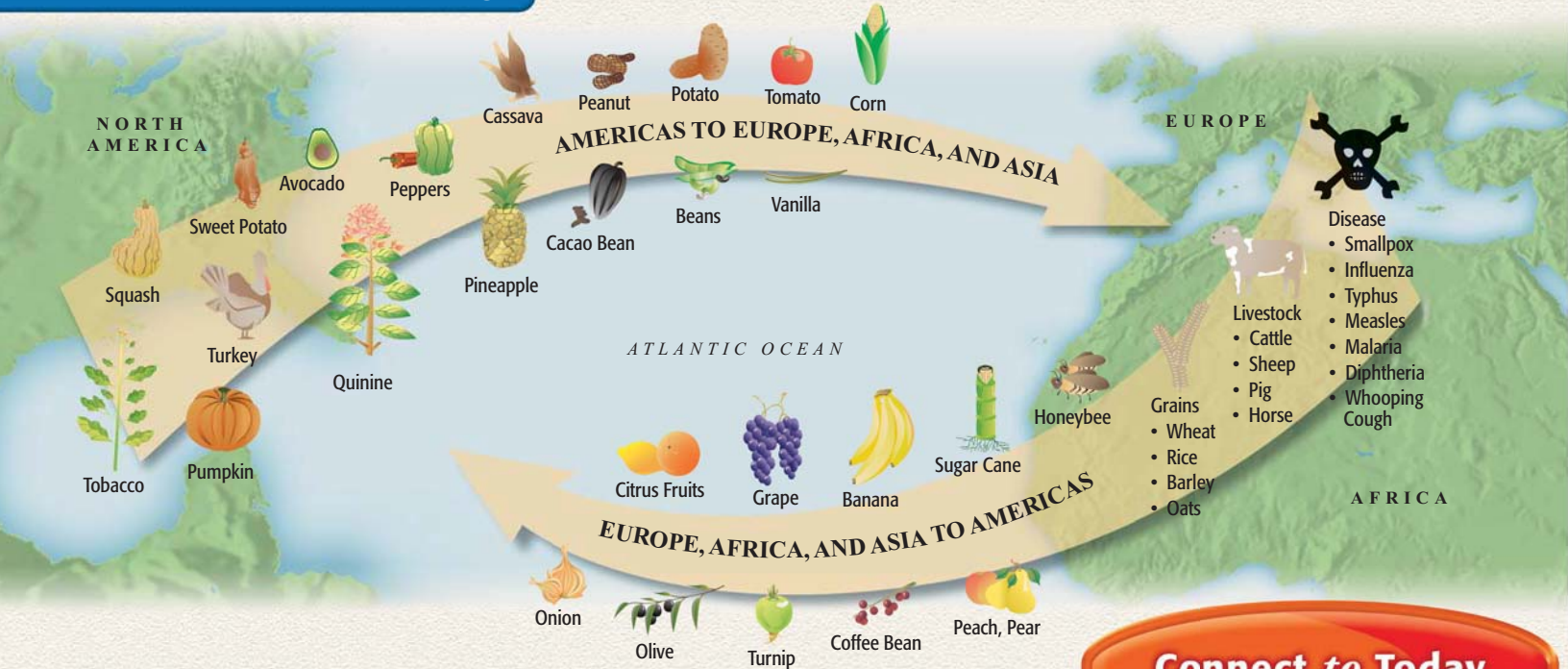
Frightening Foods

Several foods from the Americas that we now take for granted at first amazed and terrified Europeans. Early on, people thought the tomato was harmful to eat. One German official warned that the tomato “should not be taken internally.” In 1619, officials in Burgundy, France, banned potatoes, explaining that “too frequent use of them caused the leprosy.” In 1774, starving peasants in Prussia refused to eat the spud.

“The culinary life we owe Columbus is a progressive dinner in which the whole human race takes part but no one need leave home to sample all the courses.”

Raymond Sokolov

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Patterns of Interaction



The Geography of Food: The Impact of Potatoes and Sugar

Think about your favorite foods. Chances are that at least one originated in a distant land. Throughout history, the introduction of new foods into a region has dramatically changed lives—for better and worse. Dependence on the potato, for example, led to a famine in Ireland. This prompted a massive migration of Irish people to other countries. In the Americas, the introduction of sugar led to riches for some and enslavement for many others.

Connect to Today

1. Forming Opinions Have students work in small groups to pose and answer questions about the beneficial and harmful aspects of the Columbian Exchange.

See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R20.

2. Comparing and Contrasting Find out what major items are exchanged or traded between the United States and either Asia, Africa, or Europe. How do the items compare with those of the Columbian Exchange? Report your findings to the class.