

Maine Is Busy Praising The Potatoes  
By JULIA MOSKIN, New York Times  
November 30, 2005

WHEN Aroostook County crowned its first Potato Blossom Queen, in 1937, the county seat, Houlton, was one of the 10 richest towns in New England. The county's famed potatoes had been nourishing the nation for 130 years.

But that was before the great plains of Idaho had become virtual French fry factories, and before irrigation, pesticides and fertilizers made it possible to grow potatoes even in the warm, sandy soil of Florida.

Now, said Jim Gerritsen, a farmer in Bridgewater, Me., "our biggest export is our children; potatoes are second." Aroostook is the largest county east of the Mississippi River; according to the 2000 census, it is one of the emptiest, with only 11 people per square mile.

But a high proportion of those people are farmers who are convinced of the superiority of the Maine potato, and are fiercely dedicated to preserving it, along with their small family farms. "Now we just have to convince the rest of the world, one mouth at a time," Mr. Gerritsen said.

This month, Hugo's, one of several restaurants that have transformed Portland into a cradle of artisanal bread and wood-roasted apple tarts, did its part with its fifth annual potato dinner.

Forty guests paid \$120 each for a nine-course ballet that included Maine-grown potatoes in every course. The potatoes were boiled, whipped, crumb-coated, poached in butter, shaved and even coated in chocolate.

The meal began with the chef-owner Rob Evans's signature inside-out French fry, a tiny tube of potato filled with a line of Heinz ketchup, then sealed, coated with finely ground panko and deep-fried. (Mr. Evans's innovative dishes often incorporate familiar flavors: his succulent potato consommé is garnished with a cap of gelled sour cream and a drizzle of hot bacon fat.) But the preparations began six hours earlier when Nancy Pugh, the restaurant's co-owner, started drilling holes in the huge russet potatoes that would hold a deep pink bouquet on every table.

Theme dinners in restaurants are hardly unusual, but the featured ingredient is often something elusive, like wild game, wild mushrooms or the first asparagus of spring, and seldom something so pedestrian as a potato.

But these are not ordinary potatoes, said Mr. Evans, who grew up near Boston and cooked at the French Laundry and the Inn at Little Washington before settling in Portland in 2000. "I've never worked with so many different kinds before, so many textures," he said. "The Carola has this creamy flavor, the Butte is light and silky. I never thought Maine produce could compete with California, and the ingredients are not as opulent, but all you have to do is pay attention."

To distinguish their potatoes, these farmers have embraced a raft of ideological labels: organic, local, sustainable, heirloom, slow, artisanal, gourmet and farm-to-table. Instead of growing an industrial potato suitable for long-term storage, transport or freezing, they say they grow a culinary potato.

"There are literally hundreds of potato breeds to choose from," said Jim Cook of Skylandia Farm, at the northern tip of the state. "We grow the 50 that do best on the plate."

This results in potatoes that truly taste better, with subtle distinctions of flavor and texture, and that command high prices at local produce markets.

"A lot of buyers told them it would never work with a cheap staple like potatoes," said Bonnie Clariot, produce manager for the Whole Grocer in Portland, which last week sold out of Wood Prairie Farm's Elba and Rose Gold potatoes at \$4.39 for a three-pound bag.

"But our customers really go out of their way to support Maine agriculture, and once they start paying attention to how the potatoes taste, they never go back," she said.

"Potatoes are like apples: think of the difference between Macs and Golden Delicious," said Mr. Cook, who contributed to the potato dinner this year, then ate with the crowd.

Farmers are always invited to the dinner, Mr. Evans said. It directly connects the people spooning up a delicious "risotto" made from Maine-gathered wild matsutake mushrooms, garlic and finely diced Butte potatoes with the people whose livelihood depends on their luxuries.

After a course that included tiny crisp-fried pierogi of foie gras wrapped in potato dough, the farmers got up, spoke about their work, and thanked the customers for coming. It is an elegant bit of marketing genius, making diners feel great about spending so much money on dinner.

But when the potato farmers started talking shop, the gloves came off. "Have you seen the summer issue of Potato Grower magazine?" Mr. Gerritsen said. A current spud scandal: many of the so-called Yukon Golds in markets are inferior copies from Canada, the farmers said. "A true Yukon Gold will have a pinkish cast to its eyes and skin, and it's more round, not oblong or flat," Mr. Cook said.

"People always say that Yukon Golds taste buttery, but they actually taste like potatoes," he added. "It's just that people have become used to tasteless potatoes, and 'buttery' is a compliment."

As the dinner wore on, more myths slid under the table. New potatoes aren't new in the sense of being just dug, nor are they a special kind of potato; they are baby potatoes, dug before they had a chance to grow to full size. Potatoes will not last long in the refrigerator, especially if placed near onions, which secretly encourage them to sprout. Water should never touch potatoes until they are about to be cooked; they should be brushed, never washed, when you buy them. Potatoes should be bagged in paper: just 10 hours under the fluorescent lights of the produce section can start the process that will turn them green and bitter.

The only quiet moment came when a visitor inadvertently referred to baking potatoes as Idahos. A silence fell; eyes grew cold. Although Maine farmers pay grudging respect to the marketing savvy of the Idaho Potato Commission, there is lingering bitterness and bewilderment over how Maine's potato primacy has slipped. Just 10 years ago some farmers scrambled to find a market for their crop by approaching makers of windshield wiper fluid. Many have left the land altogether; in the state, acreage under potato cultivation was cut almost in half from 1980 to 2000.

But there are hopeful signs. Maine has one of the youngest farming populations in the country, because new farmers are attracted to the state's cheap land prices. This month Len and Donnie Thibodeaux, fifth-generation potato farmers, began selling Cold River Vodka, a potato vodka they developed with experienced marketers. The distillery, which is open to the public, was built just up the road from L. L. Bean in Freeport, Me., in one of the state's busiest tourist corridors.

Back at Hugo's, the last bite of the meal was as explosively original as the first. A tiny, sweet cone was rolled from a tuile spiked with chili pepper; ice cream was churned from cream infused with potato for richness, then smoked and sweetened with maple sugar. Smoked cream? "We just put it in a roasting pan, put the pan in the smoker, and cover the whole thing with foil," said Mr. Evans, who prides himself on producing original cuisine in a small kitchen with only four cooks in a city that not long ago considered lobster rolls the ultimate luxury food.

Aroostook County still produces 1.6 billion pounds of potatoes each year, and the county's schools still close for three weeks every September to free up hands for the potato harvest. In July purple blossoms still wave over fields of blue potatoes, pink blossoms over red potatoes, and white over white. "A lot of people say Provence is beautiful," Mr. Cook said. "But I'll bet they haven't seen a field of blue Maine potatoes in bloom."