

Potato

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I gazed down on the ochre mountains and the crinkled surface of the earth far below. A fug of broken sleep engulfed me. Sometime after dawn, the lights came on and I knew I'd have to wake up for real. The plane landed just after 10 am and once I'd been through passport control and customs, I found the driver waiting to take me to La Colina.

Juliana and her colleagues had recently completed a trial of their new genetically engineered 'protato'. The potato is already the third most important crop in the world, and with a bit of jiggling around, levels of iron, amino acid and protein could be increased. At La Colina they are convinced that the world's growing population could live on a diet of protato alone.

The irony of the situation spurred me on. My great grandfather, James Collins, was born in Skibereen, a small town in County Cork in 1830. He was the only one of his family to survive what is known as the potato famine of 1845-47. The blight was real enough, but the famine, which reduced the Irish population by a third, was the result of an unholy combination of political and economic conditions and of dispossession, eviction and overcrowding. British rule led to a concerted effort first to control and then to abandon the poor. At the end of the day, the political ideology of the market won through, and there was starvation on scale that Western Europe had never seen before.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying previous diets were good, but they were certainly varied: medieval populations lived on skirret, welsh onions and food foraged from forests and hedgerows. By comparison, the potato – and little else – kept Irish families alive on very small plots of land. There was no scope for rotation, and reliance on this one crop was a disaster waiting to happen. My ancestors had to pawn their fishing gear, they had no animals, they had no work and there was no other food to be had.

But what of today? Is it really that different? Industrial agricultural systems force people to rely on just a few of the many varieties of vegetables that can be grown. The handful that are selected for production are suited to the machinery in use today and harvests are predictable, standardised and marketable.

Juliana and her colleagues were modifying potato genes with the aim of making this range narrower still. I'm not against potatoes or populations, but this was a step too far. Juliana's research might be scientifically sound, but it went against the principles of healthy living and ecological diversity, and my plan was to stop it in its tracks.

I'd met Juliana a few years earlier at the annual World Potato Congress, in Dublin. She spoke about the changing world of the potato, and I'd followed her work ever since. Her

challenge was to make the potato a reality. If she succeeded, her sponsors would take over the world's diet, and profits would roll in.

Juliana greeted me in the lobby. She was, smart, brisk, and fully in control. The slogan at the entrance was direct. 'Where potatoes grow, livelihoods flourish'. We put on our lab coats and hair nets, and she showed me into the spotless laboratory.

The promised potato had a short growing cycle, it used less water than other varieties, it was resistant to all known diseases and once approved it would bring hunger to an end. I pretended to be impressed by the promotional talk.



But I was not. Surely the world didn't want another monocrop with all the risks that entailed? Surely history had some lessons for the future. I was convinced the potato was another disaster in the making. Next time round it wouldn't just be Irish families that suffered - the entire population would be at risk, state control would be tighter and with who knows what political and military consequences. It was time to nip this project in the bud.

Half-way through our tour, Juliana slipped out to speak to a colleague. In an instant – a millisecond of industrial and political sabotage - I pulled the modified diabetic pen out of my pocket and injected an unsuspecting plant.

In a few days a deadly virus would spread through the lab and beyond, and no one, but no one, would trace it to me, Orla Collins, potato activist, taking revenge for the Irish famine and helping to avert a similar catastrophe in the future.

I can't take all the credit, but looking back, my intervention changed the course of history. Capitalism is still with us, but in a different form. Farms are much reduced in

size, and new – for which read old – crops are grown around the world. Supermarket chains are a thing of the past, and vegetables are almost always bought and sold in local markets.



<https://www.fao.org/international-potato-day/en>

Juliana is still hard at work, but her laboratory, high in the Andes mountains, has a new mission. It specialises in promoting 4,000 varieties of potato, matching multiple types to climatic conditions around the world.