

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Search, Discovery and Recovery of the Bodega Red Potato

by *Elissa Rubin-Mahon - 2011*

In 2005 I received a phone from a rare fruit grower and local history buff Judy Christensen asking if I had heard of the Bodega Red potato. She had been listening to my tales of treasure hunts for locally sourced endangered foodstuffs for an event that Slow Food Sonoma County North hosts annually The Ark of Taste is a Slow Food USA biodiversity program that partners with Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT), Seed Savers and the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, to research and evaluate regional heirloom foods that are becoming extinct.



Judy knew that another Slow Food Ark of Taste Committee member, Barbara Bowman, had discovered the Petaluma Gold Rush bean, another historically important local crop, growing in the kitchen garden of an elderly farmer in Wisconsin. Because of Barbara's efforts these beans had been reintroduced to the farmers of Sonoma County. Therefore when Judy came across a reference to the Bodega Red potato while reading Santa Rosa, *A 19th Century Town*, by Gaye LeBaron she thought that we might want to include them as part of a dinner.

Although the potato is integral to our county's history, information was scarce when I first started my search, relegated to a few web references and microfilmed newspaper articles at the Sonoma County Library. The Bodega Land Trust website yielded the most information. It stated that The Bodega Red potato "turned a rude hunting camp into a flourishing port and made a big town, for a short time, of Bloomfield." It also mentioned that several early settler ranching families still grew potatoes, and Bodega Reds were among the varieties listed. Thus began the search

Local legends alternately say that a South American sailor jumped ship with the potato and began to grow it. Another states that it came sewn into the hem of the dress of a soon to be Latin American bride of a Bodega Bay landowner. However it arrived, the potato flourished.

Early accounts show that Sonoma County's first cash crop was potatoes and that our county grew the most potatoes in the state in the 1850's. About 60,000 sacks were shipped from Bodega Bay to San Francisco annually. These potatoes not only fed San Francisco, but also went to the gold fields, in the Sierras, to feed the miners. Potatoes were either barged along the coast to the San Francisco bay, or taken by mule and cart to Petaluma to be barged down the Petaluma River to the bay. Spud Point was named for a potato barge that sunk on that spot in Bodega Bay.

Although I tried to contact families that had grown Bodega Red potatoes, I was not successful. I talked to local West Sonoma County families that were currently growing potatoes also. They and other farmers

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from Bolinas to Bodega had been asking about Bodega Red potatoes for years without result. They assumed that the potato had become extinct.

My next call was to the University of California Extension. I was put in touch with the state potato expert who informed me that they had no record of the Bodega Red potato in their gene bank! I did not want this to become a dead end.



Fortunately I spoke to a fellow Slow Food member, who also had an interest in local food history, about my frustration. I had a hunch that somewhere in west county Bodega Red potatoes were flourishing in a kitchen garden plot. She put me in touch with Abigail Meyers, who was then director of the Bodega Land Trust. People at the Trust had also been curious to see if the potato still existed. The Trust has a potato race each year to commemorate Bodega Bay's potato past and wanted to see them reintroduced as a crop also.

In 2007 Abby Meyers met someone who had been given seed potatoes to grow that were named Bodega Red. This unnamed heroic gardener offered the Bodega Land Trust and Slow Food seed potatoes to grow, so that the variety could again be part of Sonoma County agriculture. Abby began to grow and conserve the potatoes on Bodega Land Trust property and I reconnected with Dr Ron Voss, professor emeritus and potato expert for UC Davis, about our find.

Dr. Voss asked that we photograph the flowers and leaves of our potato and collect tubers to send to the University of California and the University of Michigan to see if this is a genetically distinct potato. Additionally he alerted Dr Chuck Brown a research geneticist for the USDA in Washington State about our discovery. I received a call from Dr Brown a week later.

Dr Brown explained that most old varieties of potatoes came to the United States indirectly. They were first brought to Europe from South America and were introduced by European settlers. There are however a very small number that were brought from South America through Mexico by the Spaniards up the west coast of North America. He requested that we also send him samples for analysis.

So far five varieties had been identified. One of them was recognized by Slow Food as part of their Ark of Taste, the Ozette, which was introduced to the Makah Indians at Neah Bay, Washington in the late 1700s. Another purple variety exists by a thread on the Olympic Peninsula and three more have been discovered in Alaska. Dr Brown felt that if we had discovered a remnant planting of the Bodega Red, there would be a strong possibility that it is part of this unique group with a history more complex and older than we imagined. We sent pictures of flowers and foliage and tubers, grown by the Bodega Land Trust both to Dr Voss and Dr Brown. Then there was the long wait for answers.

We were not idle while we anticipated the results of their research. The advent of Google Books by digitizing out of print documents was an incredible boon to my efforts to find documentation of the potato.

Through this window I was able to discover that the potato had been discussed extensively by Luther Burbank. He said that the potato's demise was due to blight, the same disease that created the potato famine in Ireland, and which could destroy a field of potatoes in a matter of days. He also used a sport (spontaneous mutation) of the Bodega Red potato, discovered by his brother George Burbank, a potato farmer on Tomales Bay, as the basis for the Burbank Red potato.



Abigail Meyers was given further information regarding potato culture by Ruth McCaughey Burke in her volumes *An Intimate History of Bodega County and the McCaughey Family, Tomales CA.* which showed that the practice of piling harvested potatoes in their fields, then covering them with vines for storage, as well as selling and eating the best ones then planting the problematic ones led to weak genetic stock that was prone to disease. Additionally, Barbara Bowman of Slow Food Sonoma County North, while researching other aspects of Sonoma County agriculture, discovered that the Bodega ranches were broken up by the 1859 Squatter's War, for land to grow potatoes.

We received word from Dr Brown in 2009 that genetic markers indicated that our potato was indeed distinct and that it originated in Chile, which corresponds with Luther Burbank's research. He also provided us with a diagram which shows the genetic relationship of our potato to others in the group he was researching and to their respective origins.

Thanks to Dr Brown we were also given the name of a small company, Pure Potato, who specialize in developing seed potatoes from endangered heirlooms. Dr Brown also donated Bodega Red potatoes to them. Through tissue culture the Pure Potato botanist has been able to isolate clean plant tissue from which virus-free seed potatoes can be grown.

The Bodega Red potato was then nominated to be boarded on to Slow Food USA's Ark of Taste, by describing its history and cultural relevance to Sonoma County. It was also evaluated for taste by local food professionals and by members of the Slow Food biodiversity committee. The committee unanimously voted for its inclusion. It was boarded in September of 2010 which has given it national recognition.

Word is spreading throughout the North Bay communities that our potato is poised to return. Nathan Boone who is leasing some of the original potato farming acreage, and other Sonoma County farmers are growing the potato to maintain it while we await the first virus free seed potatoes in spring 2012. Chefs are anticipating their arrival also.



Slow Food Sonoma County North is partnering with Rancho Bodega Historical Society for purchase of these precious virus free potatoes (just 20 pounds) and we will be working with Bodega Land Trust for distribution of them to produce a crop of potatoes that can be used again for seed for our first crop for consumption.