

# BODEGA BAY COMMUNITY

## Bodega Red Potatoes

### *On the trail of the Bodega Red potato from South America to Bodega Bay*

This is a story of buried treasure. The tale of a wayward sailor, Chilean immigrants, Mexican land grants, an arranged marriage, Luther Burbank, blight, neglect, a play, a song, a band, and distrust. This is the story of a potato. The Bodega Red potato, to be exact.

Frequently mentioned by Luther Burbank the Bodega Red was once the favored potato of Sonoma County. It grew so hardily and was so well liked for its thin skin, nutty flavor, and great cooking qualities that it was briefly the premiere potato in California, back in 1850 when the population was a bit smaller.

The Bodega Red is a heritage breed that may have come with a land-sick sailor when he jumped ship or may have had its seeds sewn into the hem of a dress worn by a young bride, Maunela Torres arriving here over 150 years ago to marry a stranger (Capt. Stephen Smith) who needed a foreign wife to secure a local land grant.

The Bodega Red was so popular and grew so well that it was shipped to the gold fields to feed the Forty-Niners. And that Spud Point in Bodega Bay was named for the tuber after a boatload of the vegetables memorably sank there. At its height, some 60,000 pounds of Bodega Reds left our fields each year. And then it all stopped.

By the 1970s, the Bodega Red potato was thought to be extinct, kaput, gone—a victim of its own success, and a local taste that found 19th century farmers eating the best ones and returning the poor growers back to the earth, eventually led to a weaker genetic strain. Presumably, the Bodega Red was forgotten.

No good mystery is complete without a detective. Enter Elissa Rubin-Mahon. A chef with a business purveying preserved foods, Rubin-Mahon is also active in the Slow Food Sonoma County North in which seeds from such heritage products as the Gravenstein apple are saved to forestall extinction. In 2005, her friend Judy Christensen was reading Gaye



LeBaron's book, *Santa Rosa, a 19th Century Town*, and came across mention of a potato with which she was unfamiliar. Christensen thought Rubin-Mahon might be interested in tracking it down. "I started looking around and found the names of some people who were growing the potato," Rubin-Mahon says. "I tried contacting them but they didn't contact me back and no one would talk to her about the potato.

Rubin-Mahon turned to friends at the Bodega Land Trust and she was "able to procure some potatoes from an anonymous source." The next step in her mission was to verify the potato. She reached out to Dr. Chuck Brown, a USDA researcher in Washington state who was working on the six unique varieties from South America potatoes that had all migrated up our West Coast. In 2009, Dr. Brown confirmed that her samples were "indeed distinct and had originated in Chile."

The Bodega Land Trust planted some Bodega Reds in its demonstration garden. The Bodega Red was back. Rubin-Mahon praises the potato's flavor as "a combination of floury and creamy. It also makes the most amazing potato chips you can imagine. What's more, the tuber has its own fan base, the Bodega Red Potato Club, and its own tribute act, the Bodega Red Potato Band. A short musical play, "Manuela, Beauty of Bodega" (she of the potato-lined dress), written by Rancho Bodega Historical Society's chief archivist Robin Rudderow featured a song intended to be sung to the tune of "O, Susanna!". - Gretchen Giles 2014, *madelocalmagazine.com*

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**O, Manuela!  
Our beauty from Peru  
We'll keep planting red potatoes  
In fond memory of you.  
Red potatoes!  
From Chile not Peru,  
They are called Bodega Reds and  
They are mighty tasty, too**

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