The **Columbian Exchange** refers to the transfer of culture, technology, people, and products between these two regions. Before Columbus’s discovery, the people of the “Old World” (Europe, Africa, and Asia) and the “New World” (the Americas) had not been in contact with one another for thousands of years. These two regions had developed different cultures and technologies, had domesticated different plants and animals, and had suffered from different diseases. Here is a list of some of the things that were part of the exchange:

- **Old World to New World**
  - **Culture**: Christianity, European languages, European political and economic systems
  - **Animals**: chickens, cows, donkeys, goats, honey bees, horses, pigs, sheep
  - **Plants**: rice, wheat, apples, bananas, barley, carrots, coffee, oranges, lemons, lettuce, olives, onions, peaches
- **Diseases**: smallpox, measles, influenza, malaria, chicken pox, cholera, diphtheria

- **New World to Old World**
  - **Animals**: llamas, turkeys
  - **Plants**: peppers, cacao, potatoes, tomatoes, corn (maize), rubber, tobacco, peanuts, lager yeast
  - **Diseases**: syphilis

As you can see, the cultural exchange largely went one way. Every country in Latin America is now predominantly Christian, Spanish and Portuguese are now the majority languages, and the economic and political systems of every country are based on European systems. Along with this came people – millions of Europeans resettled in the Americas, along with enslaved Africans and, later, migrants from Asia. Few cultural traits or people went the other direction.

The agricultural components of the Columbian Exchange also permanently altered the cultures of the New World. It is difficult to imagine, for example, Native Americans cultures like the Lakota Sioux not having horses, but horses didn’t arrive in North America until the 1500s, when they were introduced by the Spanish. Subsequently, a “cowboy” culture of horses and cattle ranching became engrained in the national identity of the United States, Mexico, and Argentina, among others. And many of the basic food crops of the Americas were first domesticated in the Old World.

The effect of the Columbian Exchange on Old World agriculture and eating habits was no less profound. If you like Italian food (and who doesn’t), it’s tough to imagine it without tomato sauce, but the tomato was unseen in Italy until the 1500s. Potatoes, so integral to the cuisines of countries like Germany and Ireland, were first domesticated in Peru, and arrived in Europe around the same time. Corn (known as maize outside North America) has become a staple food crop in Africa. Cacao, which is used to make chocolate, is one of Africa’s leading exports. And the yeast used to ferment lager – that wonderful beer that was perfected by the Germans, Austrians, and Czechs – was discovered in Argentina. Another New World product was the chili pepper. Integral to cuisines throughout the world – and famously important in Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and Chinese food – chili peppers were not spicing up the Old World until about five centuries ago.

Perhaps the most significant, and certainly the most devastating impact of the Columbian Exchange was the introduction of Old-World diseases to the Americas. For thousands of years, various diseases had evolved in the Old World,
including smallpox, measles, influenza, malaria, chicken pox, cholera, diphtheria. As we’ve seen with the coronavirus pandemic, diseases can be particularly devastating when they are first introduced to the human population, because no one has developed an immunity to it. By the 1400s, measles, smallpox, and the flu had killed scores of people in the Old World, but over the course of many centuries, a lot of Europeans, Africans, and Asians had developed immune systems that were resistant to those diseases. In 1492, nobody in the Americas had ever been exposed to them, so there was no “herd immunity.” When these diseases were introduced by Europeans, they swept through the population like wildfire, killing millions. By 1650, the population of Native Americans in Latin America, which had perhaps been as large as 100 million, had dwindled to under 6 million.

As far we know, only one disease went the other way – syphilis. Syphilis is venereal disease, and outbreaks would spread throughout the Old World in the centuries after the Conquest. There is some evidence that many members of Columbus’s crew actually died of syphilis after they returned to Spain, something that some Native Americans view as a form of poetic justice. And, of course, Native Americans also unleashed a scourge in the Columbian Exchange that would kill millions of people in the Old World – tobacco.

Did you know?

Although the potato is indigenous to Latin America, none of the world’s ten largest potato producing countries – China, India, Russia, Ukraine, the United States, Germany, Bangladesh, Poland, France, and the Netherlands – are located there. Brazil comes closest, in 20th place.