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Taste

Oh, Oh, Ozette!

By Greg Atkinson

AT THE STUMBLING Goat Bistro in Seattle, a few food lovers gathered last November to celebrate a humble little spud known as the Ozette potato. Members of the organization called Slow Food had recently welcomed the Ozette on board something they call the Ark of Taste.



enlarge THOMAS JAMES HURST / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Essentially a list of foods recognized for their history and taste, the ark was established in 1996 by members of Slow Food, an organization devoted to preserving endangered tastes. The roster includes traditional breeds of animals, fruits, vegetables and artisanally prepared foods like cheese, pastas and sweets that might otherwise be swept away by the current flood of processed foods.

Andrew Stout, owner of Full Circle Farms, is one local grower who's joined the effort to save and celebrate Ozette potatoes, a variety brought directly to the Olympic Peninsula from South America.

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Why so much excitement about a potato? Gerry Warren, who helped found the local convivium or chapter of Slow Food, known as Slow Food Seattle, nominated the Ozette for inclusion in the ark. "It has a distinctive flavor," he says. "It's potentially sustainable, and it has great story."

The Ozette potato does indeed have a great story. Before European voyagers carried them all around the globe in the late 16th century, Ozette potatoes, like all potatoes, were confined to the Andes mountains of South America. Spanish explorers brought the potato to the West Coast of North America and introduced it to the Makah Indian tribe living near Lake Ozette in the early 1700s, long before other potato varieties made their way from South America, to Europe then back across the Atlantic to European colonies on the Eastern seaboard.

"Recent phylogenetic study, combined with the historic evidence, confirms Makah lore that the Ozette did come to North America directly from South America," reports Warren on the Slow Food Seattle Web site. "In 1792, a Spanish fort was briefly established at Neah Bay and a garden was planted

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with potatoes brought directly from South America."

When Spanish explorers first encountered the tubers, they described them as truffles. "A delicacy for the Indians and a dainty dish even for Spaniards," noted the account of one explorer. Ozette potatoes may not taste like truffles exactly, but it's easy to see why these and other "fingerling" potatoes generated some excitement. Thin-skinned with a nutty, earthy taste, the potatoes are less starchy than the spuds that most of us buy in grocery stores and restaurants.

To order them
Ozette potatoes for planting cost about \$2.75 a pound, plus shipping. Order them from:
• Milk Ranch Specialty Potatoes, L.L.C., www.milk ranch.com .
• Seed Savers, www.seedsavers.org .

They are a classic fingerling-type potato, about an inch in diameter and anywhere from 3 to 7 inches long. Other fingerlings, available at farmers markets and some supermarkets, include the Russian banana, French fingerling and Purple Peruvian. What stands out about the Ozette is its texture. Possessed of the kind of starch one finds in certain vegetables like the densest winter squash or carefully roasted chestnuts, these potatoes are dense and buttery, almost creamy.

I like to boil the potatoes in salted water until they are just fork tender, then split them in half lengthwise and press them onto a pan that's coated with olive oil and sprinkled with rosemary leaves. Then, I slowly brown the potatoes, cut side down without stirring them around at all, and I get a lovely crust on the surface while the inside of the potato is infused with the perfume of the browning rosemary. Other cooks like to serve them in warm potato salads or transform them into richly textured potato pancakes. They also make a sumptuous mash.

"The ark is simply a registry of items of interest," says Warren. "The purpose is to heighten awareness of the food. We've also applied to make the Ozette a presidium. A presidium is an actual partnership between Slow Food and other community entities to support the needs of keeping the food viable and available."

To keep Ozettes from becoming extinct, Slow Food Seattle purchased 500 pounds of them from Milk Ranch Specialty Potatoes in Colorado. They gave about 100 pounds to local people and sold the rest at less than cost to three tilth-like farmers in the area, says Warren. These included Full Circle Farm in Carnation, Nature's Last Stand in Seattle and Half Moon Acre Farm on Vashon Island. "In all our communications," says Warren, "we're trying to credit the Makah as the stewards."

Like all fingerling potatoes, Ozettes are a little hard to come by in the spring, but this is the perfect time to plant them so you can maintain an endless supply of your own.

Greg Atkinson is author of "West Coast Cooking." He can be reached at greg@northwestessentials.com. Thomas James Hurst is a Seattle Times staff photographer.

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