**MAKAH OZETTE FINGERLING POTATO**

**Current Presidia in the USA**

**Makah Ozette Potato**

In the 1980’s an unknown fingerling potato was recognized to be a staple in the diet of Pacific Coast Native Americans of the Makah Nation. The Makah occupy the region around Neah Bay, Washington, that is the most northwesterly point in the United States. Tribal lore reported that this potato had been used by these people for about 200 years. The Makah had named this potato the Ozette after one of their five villages located around Neah Bay.

All potatoes originated in South America and it was thought that all potatoes now in the Americas were first taken to Europe by Spaniards before they came to the Americas with the European colonization. However in 2004 phylogenetic analysis conducted at Washington State University showed evidence that the Makah Ozette potato was certain to have been imported directly from South America.

How did this happen? After their conquests in South America, the Spanish began a mission to further establish their empire on the western shores of North America. In the spring of 1791 they established a fort at Neah Bay and as was the custom, a garden was planted that surely included potatoes they brought directly from South America or Mexico. Over the winter of 1791 the Spanish found the severe weather conditions at the fort’s harbor unsafe for mooring their vessels, and abandoned the fort in the spring of 1792.

The Makah people, who were in need of a carbohydrate source, either traded or found volunteers of this rather weedy plant left in the garden of the abandoned fort. They quickly adopted the potato and became its stewards, growing it in their backyard gardens for over 200 years. Not until the late 1980’s was this potato catalogued and was seed grown outside the Makah Nation. To date there has been very limited commercial production of this potato, although it is noted to be grown by a few small farmers in several regions of the US.

THE PRESIDIUM

The Makah Ozette potato was boarded to the Ark of Taste in September 2005 and a presidium application was submitted in November 2006. The partners in the presidium were Slow Food Seattle, the Makah Nation, several farmers who supply restaurants and sell at farmers markets, a laboratory which produces potato seed for the USDA at an Agricultural Research Station, and the Seattle chapter of the Chefs Collaborative.

In the early development of this project Slow Food Seattle used a portion of its treasury to purchase five hundred pounds of certified seed potato. One hundred pounds was sold to home gardeners and 400 pounds of potatoes that were sold to farmers interested in growing this crop. The growers sold to the fresh market in the greater Seattle area in the fall of 2006. Slow Food Seattle received enough potatoes to sell to cover the cost of the seed and to mount a public relations campaign that produced considerable press and demand for the Makah Ozette. In addition, nine chefs featured the potato on their fall menus.

2006 activities produced a significant demand for the potato but the primary seed growers had a crop failure and seed was very limited in the spring of 2007. This prompted the group to call upon Pure Potato, a laboratory who worked to certify the potato as virus fee. Pure Potato is beginning the three year process of becoming a local seed source. Based on the publicity campaign many small farms did a limited planting of the Makah Ozette for the 2007 harvest. In the fall of 2007 the coordinating group again mounted a campaign to further regional awareness of the Makah Ozette potato, featured it as a menu item at the American Heritage Picnic in Seattle (organized by Slow Food Seattle and the Seattle Chefs Collaborative chapter) and continued the development of a local seed source. This wonderful potato became an official presidia project in 2008!

Because of all the presidium’s promotional efforts, the Makah Ozette potato seed is in high demand. The presidium is focused on increasing seed production to bring more seed to market.

**Production Area:** Northwest Washington State

**Presidium Coordinator:** Gerry Warren