History of Soy Script

Ever wonder where the foods you eat come from, and how they’ve arrived at your dinner table? Or, how the products you use every day came to be?

On the surface, soybeans – small, pea-sized beans that have a relatively flavorless taste – seem rather... unimpressive. But the origin and history of soybeans is a fascinating tale of early explorers, sea-faring merchants, ancient Oriental cultures, and American inventers and agricultural pioneers.

Drawing upon both ancient and modern influences, the soybean has become one of the most important crops and industrial products in human history.

Let’s take a look at how it all began.

Think soybeans are a relatively new food? While this may be true in the United States, soybeans have been cultivated in China for human consumption for 3,000 to 5,000 years.

Originally called “shu,” wild soybeans were domesticated over the course of several millennia by Chinese farmers. Soybeans were easy to cultivate because they grew well in a lot of different soils and climates.

But soybeans are actually toxic if they’re eaten raw, so the Chinese invented a number of fascinating techniques to cook the edible seed of the soybean plant. They figured out how to process the bean curd to create dishes like tofu, and to ferment the beans to create miso, tempeh and a wide range of other delicious soy foods.

Today, soybeans are considered a staple in Chinese cuisine and culture. But how exactly did the soybean rise to prominence in the United States?

The answer lies in a complex web of trade and exploration, warfare, agricultural production and scientific discoveries.

Let’s start with trade and exploration. In ancient times, early traders and explorers traversed across continents to exchange goods and spices. Chinese merchants traded soy with neighboring nations and soon it became an important food in Japan and Korea.

As sea routes were established, soy left Asian shores for the first time. But how did soybeans make it across the Pacific? Turns out, early explorers needed an inexpensive ballast to put in their ships’ lower compartments to keep them steady in rough seas. And big bags of soybeans did just the trick. These bags were often left behind to make room for new cargo when the ships arrived at their new destination in Europe or elsewhere.

In 1765, the first bag of soybeans landed on the shores of what is now the United States. They were brought to the colony of Georgia from London by a seaman named Samuel Bowen. The first soybean seeds were planted on a plantation in Savannah not long after.

But it took over a century for soy farming to really take off in the United States. Why? Well, during the 1800s, soybeans were mostly grown as a cover crop or forage for cattle. There just wasn’t a lot of demand for the crop, as the American public was largely unfamiliar with soy foods and America relied largely on vegetable oil imports to use for baking and frying foods. So soy’s unlocked potential as a nutritional powerhouse and as an edible oil remained unknown.

But wartime shortages changed that. Up until World War Two, China was the world’s biggest supplier of soybeans. However, both the war and internal revolution devastated soybean fields in China and the supply lines were cut to countries like the United States, who at the time, imported 40 percent of its edible oils and fats. To meet demand, United States farmers started producing soybeans in large quantities to supply soybean oil for both food and industrial applications.

Hold on, the story doesn’t end there. The war not only changed how we grow soybeans, it also transformed how we raise and produce animals on the farm.

In the 1950s, small family farms in the United States started to give way to large, industrial farming operations that mimicked the assembly line production model used to produce a wide range of products during the war.

The turkeys, pigs, chicken and cattle on these industrial farms needed a large source of protein to grow big, quickly. Soybean meal turned out to be the perfect solution.

Today, the livestock industry continues to grow, and although there is now increased consumer demand for new soy food products such as margarine, we continue to produce more soybeans for animal consumption than human consumption in America today.

In recent decades, scientific discovery and innovation at research universities and in the private sector have radically transformed how we use soy. American scientists and engineers have uncovered many industrial applications for soy, including soy-based plastics, lubricants and soy textile fibers.

Soy is now a major part of our everyday lives. It’s in the cosmetics we use, the pharmaceuticals we take, and the materials we use to build our homes, schools and offices.

Who knew that one little bean could have such a wide range of uses, impacting the lives of people around the world. Rooted in both China’s ancient culinary traditions and the innovations of contemporary food scientists, agronomists and inventors in the United States, soybeans possess a rich past and hold great promise as an agricultural crop and industrial product in the modern world.