

Potato — KaRtuugaaq

KARTUUGAARTURTAARTUKUT, IQALLUGMEK CALI. – WE EAT POTATOES TO GO WITH THE FISH.



Photo: Potato shack, Ouzinkie area. Smith Collection, courtesy of Tim and Norman Smith.

Derived from the Russian word for potato, *kartofel*, the Alutiiq word for potato, *kaRtuugaaq*, reflects the introduction of garden produce to Kodiak in the nineteenth century. Russian traders introduced potatoes and potato gardening, encouraging potatoes to become a staple winter food in Alutiiq communities. Potatoes were particularly valuable because they could be stored well into winter. Elders remember their parents buying sacks of potatoes in the fall, purchased from cannery stores with summer wages. Others helped their mothers tend family gardens, pulling weeds and eating fresh produce on the sly, including raw potatoes.

In the historic era, Alutiiq people began to add mashed potatoes to *akutaq*, a popular dessert made from berries, fish eggs, seal oil, and the starchy bulbs of the Kamchatka lily. Lily bulbs, which can be dug in the summer, resemble rice. Like potatoes, they can be mashed into a starchy paste. Thus, potatoes were a good garden substitute for this wild ingredient.

Other uses for potatoes include healing. The noted Kaguyak midwife Oleanna Ashouwak is said to have put socks filled with grated potato under sick people's feet to lower their temperatures and draw out illness. Elders recall that if a potato turned grey during such treatment, it was having the desired effect.