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Spuddenfreude

barum—Once upon a time, there was a beautiful German potato by the name of Linda. Her parents, Clivia and Hansa, were established sorts who had been married by the plant breeder Friedrich Böhm. In 1974, at the age of ten, Linda was granted an official listing as a German potato, and she went on to thrive in the sandy soils of northern Germany.

Then one day in November of 2004, on the eve of her thirtieth anniversary, Linda's life was unceremoniously declared over. Under German law, the owner of a licence has the right to remove a potato from the market when the licence expires. Europlant, the owner of Linda's licence, announced that she would be replaced by a tastier, better-cooking, more disease-resistant model named Belana.

But Europlant underestimated Linda's popularity and Germans' mistrust of agribusiness. News of her demise shot through the media, and within days a nationwide Save Linda committee had formed. The backlash was led by a small group of farmers in the northwestern state of Lower Saxony, who planted hundreds of acres of Linda in protest.

"What kind of a country is this, where the will of a company can triumph over consumer demand?" asks Karsten Ellenberg, the fair-haired, round-faced organic farmer who led the protest. Ellenberg is seated at the kitchen table at his farm on the edge of the cobblestoned village of Barum, basking in the warmth of a wood stove. His golden retriever, Lotta, snores on a mat in the corner. His wife is busy doing the accounting and the kids are out skating on the pond. This farm has been in the Ellenberg family for five centuries; more than half of the potatoes grown here are Lindas. "She's a creamy potato, she just melts on your tongue," Ellenberg says, his expression suggesting the recollection of a first love. "She doesn't belong to a company, she belongs to the common good."

Ellenberg had been working with Europlant for years, providing small "seeding" potatoes (a common arrangement for German farmers), and he had used the company's stock to grow the rebel spuds. By the time the contraband Lindas had

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come up, Europlant had caught wind of the plot and launched a suit over breach of contract. Two hundred and fifty tonnes of Linda were confiscated and placed under the supervision of federal authorities. Ellenberg chuckles at the memory. "When Frederick the Great introduced potatoes to Prussia, the people were skeptical," he says. "So he sent soldiers out to guard the fields. Very clever. As soon as you put something under official protection, people think it's valuable and want to have it."

Soon after the protest, Linda hit the front pages of national papers and appeared on television talk shows. She was championed loudly by the then-federal minister of consumer affairs, a member of the Green Party. Slow Food groups and Greenpeace joined the cause. In response, the government granted Linda an additional two years on its listing. Months later, in the fall of 2005, the Europlant suit was settled and the confiscated Lindas were handed over to the company. Since then, Ellenberg has set his sights on getting Linda permanently placed on the government's list once the two-year grace period is up.

Ellenberg throws on a black leather jacket and stomps through the snow to a brick building that used to be the farm's bakery. There, under lock and key, is his laboratory. Ten years ago, he started collecting and growing old, forgotten potato varieties. What began as a hobby became an obsession. "I want to guarantee the preservation of our old sorts," he says. He opens an industrial fridge to reveal hundreds of small plastic tubs containing potato sprouts planted in agar. Ellenberg is working on protein-rich potatoes, cancer-preventing potatoes, potatoes with blue skin and pink flesh. Two entire shelves are devoted to Linda. Her father, Hansa, who unlike Linda was allowed to remain on the German market after his thirtieth birthday, sits above her. Beneath are new varieties Emma (named for his grandmother) and Herbie (the car in the film *The Love Bug*). "If I don't do this, nobody will," he says, admiring a Linda plant that's groping the sides of its tub.

Ellenberg surfs catalogues on the Web and imports breeds from around the world. The barn next door contains hundreds of sacks of potatoes from the great European lineages: Belles de Fontenay, Dukes of York, Blue Swedes, King Edwards, Shetland Blacks. Ellenberg points with pride to a corner stockpile of baby Lindas—seeding potatoes like the ones confiscated by Europlant. The three sacks each bear tags identifying Linda as "not yet recognized vegetable matter."

Yet—the critical word. As part of Ellenberg's licence-renewal application, Linda will undergo a two-year testing process that will pit her against the toughest and tastiest of Germany's 209 listed varieties. Will she be able to hold her own on the potato market of the twenty-first century, dominated as it is by fast-growing, disease-resistant super-breeds?

"Unlikely," says Jörg Renatus, managing director of Europlant. Seated in the oak-panelled bar of Berlin's Kempinski Hotel, Renatus sports an anthracite-coloured business suit. He's visiting the capital from his native Hamburg for a trade fair.

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"Look," he says, massaging his Palm Pilot, "Linda is forty years old. She was first bred in 1964. She's vulnerable to fungus infections and has no resistance to nematodes. In the fall, she's mealy; in the spring, she's firm. She's just one sort like hundreds of others."

Europlant, which is Germany's largest potato-breeding company, owns more than seventy potato licences. With names like Omega and Olga, Romula and Rosella, Filea and Fribona, they're listed on the company website according to their end purposes: french fry, starch, flakes, crisps. No Ellenberg-style odes, no excursus into their histories, no debates on the merits of baking versus boiling. "Linda has a nice name and she enjoys popularity in the north," Renatus concedes, "but why should Volkswagen keep making the Beetle when they've got the Golf?" The Golf, in this case, is Belana, and Renatus lights up at the mention of her name. "She's yellow and firm, has excellent resistance and an intense taste. And she's already selling better than Linda ever did. We're exporting her, even to Canada." Asked if Linda ever got that far, Renatus laughs. "Linda was such a little sort, she was never abroad."

For now, Linda will have to fight the noble fight on her own. "She'll survive in some form," Ellenberg says. He's been putting Linda through various "shock therapies," as he calls them, trying to boost her resistance. And he's been brushing up on European Union agricultural law, particularly a law stating that if a plant is listed in one EU member country, it can be listed and sold in other member countries. "Linda doesn't just grow in German soil," Ellenberg says. He's already in discussion with three other countries.

—*Naomi Buck*

Buck is a Toronto-born writer who lives in Berlin. She is the editor of the online magazine signandsight.com.

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