Rehabilitating the “Stinking Herbe”
A Case Study of Culinary Prejudice

As a fresh herb, coriander has a long history of use in the kitchen, covering several millennia, and in post-Columbian times it achieved a global distribution, reaching most temperate and subtropical countries. It has become an integral part of many culinary traditions, such as those of Thailand, Mexico, the Caribbean, South America, Egypt, Morocco, and Portugal. Few modern consumers are aware that it was once more common in European cuisines, but that it fell from grace as medieval styles of cooking were abandoned. In Spain, for example, Elizabeth David found recipes from the sixteenth century calling for both green and dried coriander, although the fresh herb is seldom used in the twentieth-century Spanish kitchen. When this loss of popularity is tracked in European texts from the late sixteenth century on, it is found to be associated with a curious belief about the origin of the word coriander, an etymology that has played a formative role in further damaging the plant’s reputation. Unravelling the relationship between the plant and its European names is the first step in the process of rehabilitation—after all, what useful herb deserves to be damned by association?

Since John Gerard referred to green coriander in 1597 as a “very stinking herbe” with leaves of “venemous quality,” its reputation among English-speaking cooks and consumers has declined to the point of neglect or verbal abuse.

In France, the same trend is evident. Gerard’s contemporary, Olivier de Serres, included the plant in his flower garden for perverse reasons: “ses feuilles, frottées entre les mains, puant comme punaises, chose donnant lustre à la bonne senteur des autres herbes” (“its leaves, rubbed between the hands, smell like stink bugs, a thing enhancing the good scent of the other plants”). In his discourse on salads, nearly a century later, John Evelyn discussed coriander under the heading of salad plants “since grown obsolete or quite neglected with us,” noting that like wormwood it might be “profitable…to the Stomach, but offensive to the Head.”

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Phillip Miller noted that it was “formerly cultivated in the gardens as a sallad herb, and in the East Indies is still much cultivated,” but he considered that in Europe neither seed nor herb “are now much used.” In the early nineteenth century, John Claudius Loudon and William Cobbett indicated that the leaves were used by some persons “in soups and salads.” Mrs. Beeton reaffirmed this use in the first (1861) edition of The Book of Household Management, where she stated that coriander “is cultivated for the sake of its tender leaves, which are highly aromatic.” However, few Victorian recipes called for coriander in any form. There is some evidence of a hardening of attitudes to coriander towards the end of the century. The 1889 edition of Mrs. Beeton’s work drops the entry on coriander completely, while the 1907 Mrs. Beeton’s Family Cookery refers only to the seeds, noting that “when fresh, [they] have a disagreeable smell.” Gardeners were also exposed to negative comments about coriander: in William Robinson’s (1885) edition of Vilmorin-Andrieux’s book on vegetables, they read that “Some writers say the leaves are used for seasoning, but this statement seems odd, as all the green parts of the plant exhale a very strong odour of the wood-bug, whence the Greek name of the plant.”

The steady decline in reputation continued for most of the twentieth century, with food writers increasingly making explicit reference to the etymology of the word coriander.
Around 1930 Law’s Grocer’s Manual referred to the “rather nasty smell” of the plant, pointing out that the name “is derived from the Greek word koris—a bug, and related to the odour of the plant and unripe fruit.” In Mrs. Grieve and Mrs. Leyel’s A Modern Herbal, first published in 1931, the coriander plant was described as “intensely foetid.” This work then contrasted the tastes of English readers with those of foreigners who like the plant: “The inhabitants of Peru are so fond of the taste and smell of this herb that it enters into almost all their dishes, and the taste is often objectionable to any but a native. Both in Peru and in Egypt, the leaves are put into soup.” Again the derivation of the Latin coriandrum from Greek koros (a bug) was added, “in reference to the foetid smell of the leaves.” For Eleanour Sinclair Rohde, another pioneer of the twentieth-century herb revival, the green seed [technically a fruit], which shares the same essential oils as the leaves, “has an intensely disagreeable taste and smell (hence the botanical name, which means ‘bug’).”

Up to the 1970s, the Greek derivation was usually given in English texts as “bug,” or in one case, “wood-bug.” But in 1980 Waverley Root revealed to readers of his encyclopedic Food that the “penetrating odor” had been likened by Louis Lagriffe to “the smell of the bedbug.” Tom Stobart was skeptical of this “fancied likeness between the smell of the leaves and bed bugs” on the grounds that experience of bed bugs while travelling rough in the East had convinced him that there was “really little similarity.” However, he did not question the increasing specificity of the etymology. In 1985 Carolyn Heal and Michael Allsop speculated as to whether Pliny had called the plant “coriandrum” for its ‘buggy’ smell, coris being a bug; or perhaps because the young seed has an uncanny resemblance to Cimex lectularius, the European bed-bug.” Allen Paterson accepted the connection with the bed bug on the basis of the plant’s smell, commenting that “fortunately the herb’s sweet, cloying smell is as close as one is likely to get to that traditionally distinctive odour.” To Margaret Visser we owe the additional colorful detail that “the green leaves of coriander are said to smell like squashed bed-bugs.” We should note the qualification “said to,” reflecting the writer’s lack of experience with bed bugs, and perhaps a desire to distance herself from
knowledge of the sort of living conditions in which bed bugs thrive. Recent authoritative works have elevated the etymology into orthodoxy: in The New Oxford Book of Food Plants we read that “All parts of the fresh plant, when crushed, give off a foetid odour reminiscent of bed- or shield bugs,” and The Oxford Companion to Food informs us that both foliage and unripe seeds “have an odour which has been compared with the smell of bug-infested bed-clothes,” supporting the suggested origin from Greek koris, meaning “bed bug.” The entry concludes: “Europeans often have difficulty in overcoming their initial aversion to this smell.”

This perceptive comment raises the following questions:

—In the light of Tom Stobart’s observations cited above, does the volatile oil in green coriander really smell of bed bugs, even to coriander users, or is the identification and classification of odors subject to cultural conditioning?

—is it possible that the European aversion has influenced beliefs about the origin of the word coriander, to the extent of reinforcing what may be a false etymology, which has in turn served to justify the Western distaste for fresh coriander?

—what do we know of the origins of coriander, the plant and its various names?

Starting with the first question, inquiries directed to a Thai colleague and his family were answered with a definite denial: regular users of green coriander in Southeast Asia do not consider that the plant smells of bed bugs. In view of their heavy dependence on the plant as a garnish and ingredient of red and green curry pastes, this is not surprising. Chinese users adopted the term yuan cai (Cantonese yim sai) for coriander greens, equivalent to “fragrant vegetable.” According to Geri Harrington, “All Chinese cookbooks say it is aromatic and delicately scented.” In contrast to American seed catalogues (which often liken the smell to that of bed bugs), seed catalogues from Chinese companies emphasize its fragrance and flavor. Cookbooks describing South Asian cuisines speak of coriander leaves as “aromatic,” with “delicate, fresh fragrance,” and praise their ability to give “a lovely flavour to food.” English-speaking food writers advocating the use of fresh coriander describe its “clean lemon-like taste,” its “exotic, funky flavour,” its “spicy, strongly scented leaves,” its “haunting perfume,” and its “delicious fragrance.” Unlike the universal primary tastes, aromas are notoriously difficult to classify, and descriptive vocabularies developed for them display substantial variations in perception, variations which may well be influenced by an individual’s cultural background. What is clear is that while non-users find the smell of coriander disagreeable, habitual users agree that it is attractive both in scent and flavor.

Did ancient users of coriander describe it just as favorably? When the Greeks and Romans used their terms koriannon and coriandrum did they have any knowledge of the derivation—in other words, did they acknowledge any link between the bed bug and the plant in terminology, appearance, or smell? There is no evidence that they did. Even Classical writers like Theophrastus and Pliny, who wrote about the plant world with encyclopedic breadth of vision, failed to make the connection. The only allusion cited by Margaret Visser is to Columella’s verse section of On Agriculture, in which coriander is described as famosa. Visser translates this as “notorious,” following Forster and Heffner who used the word “ill-famed,” but it could equally mean “renowned.” The Romans’ term for bug was cimex, and it is clear from many contexts in which that word was used that they meant bed bug. In fact, the word supplied our generic name for bed bugs, Cimex lectularius. Classical authors were certainly not indifferent to the bed bug’s odor: indeed to Pliny, who felt obliged to mention that they supplied an antidote to snake bites, bugs were “a most foul creature and nauseating even to speak of.” Considering the frequent use of coriander leaves and seeds in Roman cookery, its name clearly did not evoke disgusting associations. For the Greeks the terms koris and koriannon had much more in common, but judging from Athenaeus’s massive compilation of earlier Greek texts on food and dining, this did not apparently extend to shared associations.

We are left with the impression that connections between bad-smelling bugs and fresh coriander, both olfactory and etymological, are a product of the last few centuries. Olivier de Serres first spoke of the supposed similarity in smell at the end of the sixteenth century, when the dissolution of medieval European cuisines was almost complete. Medieval cooks had used both dried and fresh coriander leaves, as well as the dried seeds, a practice reflecting Classical and Arab influence. It is not unusual for ill-founded beliefs to surface as plants become unfashionable, as a justification for discarding them. In the case of fresh coriander, its identification with earlier outmoded cooking styles made it vulnerable to such a post hoc justification.

At the same time, Cimex lectularius was re-establishing itself in Northern Europe. Though known in Roman Britain there are no historical records for it until 1583. Since this bedbug may not be able to breed when temperatures fall below 15°C, an intriguing explanation for its reappearance in
Britain and France may be the sixteenth-century improvements in house construction which supplied a warmer environment. The same educated writers who advocated new cuisines and discussed new food plants may have suffered more bites and a greater sensitivity to the smell as a result of their warmer houses—to the detriment of coriander's reputation. In France, the etymological connection had been made by the late seventeenth century. Antoine Furetière’s Dictionnaire Universel stated that some people derived the word coriandre from koris because its leaves smelled of stink bugs, while others proposed a derivation from kora (pupil of the eye) and andron (man), because of the belief that coriander enfeebled the vision.

For English dictionaries, the suspect etymology began with Noah Webster’s An American Dictionary of the English Language. In the first edition (1828) the word was traced via Latin to Greek koríannon, with the comment that the seeds of Coriandrum sativum have “a strong smell and a spicy taste.” By 1882, Skeat’s Etymological Dictionary of the English Language was citing Webster as the source of a new derivation: that koríannon was perhaps from koris, “bug,” on account of the buglike or foetid smell of its leaves. Some later etymological dictionaries accepted the bug hypothesis; however, The Oxford English Dictionary avoided such speculation. The Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française recently noted that a similarity has been invoked with the smell of (bed) bugs but concluded on linguistic grounds that semantic neutralization of the notion of bad smell was unlikely, opting for a Mediterranean origin instead. With two such authorities unprepared to repeat or accept the bug connection, it is significant that most European food writers seem keen to perpetuate it.

This returns us to the second question: whether aversion to fresh coriander made European non-users receptive to a highly damaging belief about the word’s origins. I have already shown that since the late nineteenth century the bug etymology of the European words for coriander has been repeatedly stated in close textual association with the description of the odor of the fresh leaves. This leads the Western reader to the conclusion that it is perfectly reasonable to dislike coriander leaves because they smell like disgusting bed bugs. From this it is but a small step to the ethnocentric view that people who like green coriander have unacceptable tastes, as was implied in Mrs. Leyel’s reference to Peru, and perhaps in Irma Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker’s comment in Joy of Cooking that “few of us know the fresh leaves of this plant as Chinese parsley, as the Cilantro of the Caribbean, the Kothamille of Mexico, or the Dhuma of India, where its somewhat fetid odor and taste are much treasured.” This is not simply a case of the dislike inspiring the creation and spread of the false etymology among Europeans, but of the etymology reinforcing dislike among non-users, and cultural prejudice against users.

If the bug etymology is to be accepted as false, an alternative account of the origins of coriander needs to supplied. Centuries before the Classical Greeks, palace officials listed coriander under the name ko-ri-ja-da-na (plural ko-ri-(i)-a-da-na) in the Linear B documents from Late Bronze sites like Knossos in the Aegean. This term provides a convincing source for the Greek koríannon. About the same time, the Egyptians were using the word spw (pronounced 'shaw') for coriander, which they included in a number of tombs, including that of Tutankhamun. The later Coptic name for the plant was bershyw. In Assyrian centers the name of the widely-used coriander was kisbiru, a word whose antiquity stretches back to Old Babylonian, and into the third millennium B.C. This was the likely ancestor of Arabic kuzbara, Moroccan kasbour, and possibly Turkish kishnish and Afghan gashneetch. In India, Sanskrit borrowed two words for coriander from earlier South Asiatic languages. One was dhaniyaka, which became dhania in Hindi and has variants in several other Indian languages. The other was kastumbira, from which the Marathi kothimbir and Tamil kothamilee are probably derived. The Indonesian and Malayan term for coriander, ketumbar, is clearly related. As for East and Southeast Asia, it is believed that coriander reached China from the west during the Han dynasty, though the words for the plant throughout this region provide few useful cognates.

Archaeological finds of coriander confirm that it had spread widely through the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin by the second millennium B.C. Earlier finds from a Pre-Pottery Neolithic B context in Israel and Franchthi Cave in Greece, both about the seventh millennium B.C.,
await confirmation. However, the linguistic evidence for coriander in South Asia by the first to second millennium B.C. points to early domestication of the plant in its East Mediterranean and West Irano-Turanian homeland. In the future, coriander may be confirmed as one of the chief flavoring herbs of early Eurasian cereal-based cooking traditions.

Among Western cooks, the rehabilitation of coriander as a fresh herb is undoubtedly part of the phenomenon of internationalization. Two steps have been involved: the first has been the acceptance after the Second World War that the cuisines of other cultures are not necessarily inferior, that they can be enjoyed as an eating-out experience, and can even be modified successfully for the British or American table. The second has been the distancing of the plant from its negative associations through the use of alternative names. Considering the long exposure of Americans to the cilantro-using Mexican tradition and to the cuisines of Asian migrants, it is not surprising that coriander became a fashionable herb in parts of the United States by the late 1970s. But in order to become chic in a country in which Noah Webster’s dictionary was still influential, a name change was desirable. In 1978 Geri Harrington described how certain gourmet cooks were using the name cilantro for a plant which “has acquired a certain amount of snob appeal” and which she referred to as “Chinese parsley.”

Since there is no similarity in taste between fresh coriander and parsley, we must look elsewhere for the origin of this cross-cultural binomial. It is true that the leaves of the young coriander plant resemble those of flat-leafed (Italian) parsley; however, parallels in usage are more usually invoked as the explanation. Margaret Visser believes that it was a nickname given by “the parsley-loving English, who noticed the ways in which coriander is used in all of Asia except Japan” as a garnish. The same point was made by Helen Saberi for Afghanistan, where coriander is sometimes called Afghan parsley “because it is used just like parsley, for garnishing as well as for flavour.” Similarly, coriander leaves have been called “Thai parsley,” persil arabe in French, and indische Petersilie in German. The widespread use of this analogy for over fifty years suggests that Europeans coming to terms with ethnic cultures were so unfamiliar with the appearance of the coriander plant that they were unaware that the bundle of green leaves they were buying for their Mexican or Thai dish was the ill-famed coriander. In this roundabout way, rehabilitation has been achieved, essentially by the re-introduction of the plant as an exotic herb to countries and/or cuisines where it was once popular and highly regarded.

**Notes**

1. I am extremely grateful to the following people for their comments and advice: Professor Sid Mintz and Mrs. Jackie Mintz, Associate Professor Donn Bayard and Mrs. Daisy Bayard, Mr. Jyh Wee Sew, and Mr. Niti Pawakapan.
15. Waverley Root, Food (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 89. Root was referring to Lagriffe’s 1666 work, Livre des épices, des condiments et des aromates.
16. Tom Stobart, Herbs, Spices and Flavourings (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 90. Even though the Southeast Asian bedbug is a different species, Cimex hemipterus, with a tropical distribution (see Eva Panagiotakopulu and Paul C. Buckland, “Cimex lectularius L., the common bed bug from Pharaonic Egypt,” Antiquity 73, no. 282 [1999], 900), there has been no suggestion that its smell is different.
17. Carolyn Heal and Michael Alsbrooks, Cooking With Spices (London: Panther Books, 1985), 124. The fruit of the coriander is strongly ridged, like the dorsal surface of Cimex lectularius; however, the ridges run from side to side in the bug, and longitudinally in the coriander.


33. An example of this phenomenon involves the disease theory for plant variegation, which was invoked several times as variegated plants fell from fashion. See Helen Leach, Cultivating Myths: Fiction, Fact and Fashion in Garden History (Auckland: Godwit, 2000), 141–161.


42. ibid.


50. Proulx, The Fine Art of Salad Gardening, 156.


53. Saberi, Noshe Djan, 36.

54. Brissenden, South East Asian Food, 72; Gernot Katzer, see website http://www.ang.kfunigraz.ac.at/katzer/eng/Cori_sat.html. A cross-cultural binomial operating in the reverse direction is the Thai name for parsley, phak chi farang, meaning Western coriander (Donn Bayard, pers. comm.).