When it comes to food, the word “corruption” is liable to turn your stomach. But corruption of a different sort—etymological corruption—has been the source of some of the most intriguing food words in the English language. To a word historian, corruption essentially means that the form of a word—either its pronunciation or spelling—is accidentally altered and then given currency. For example, that’s what happened with the French phrase petit gâteau, meaning “little cake”: English speakers misconstrued the name of that French specialty as “peticote tails,” a phrase that makes little sense in a baking context, but which had the virtue of sounding familiar. As a result, Petticoat Tails remains the name of that pastry even to this day.

In fact, many French words and phrases have been corrupted into English food words. The Jordan almond, for example, has nothing to do with the country or river Jordan; it’s simply a corruption of the French jardin, meaning “garden.” Garden almonds are sweeter than almonds found in the wild. Similarly, crayfish are not a fish, but rather an edible crustacean. They acquired their name when English speakers corrupted the French crevice, a derivative of the Old German krebiz, meaning “crab.” The same sort of trouble with pronunciation is responsible for the English word “kickshaw,” a synonym for tidbit or snack. In French, the original term was quelque chose, meaning “something.” We’ve all felt the need to snack on a little something between meals. Even “apple-pie order,” which sounds so quintessentially English, arose in the eighteenth century as a corruption of a French phrase. That phrase was nappes pliées, meaning “folded linen,” suggesting minute attention to detail. My grandmother, for one, used to iron and fold unused pillow cases—she was a great believer in apple-pie order.

French isn’t the only language that English speakers have contorted. The Italian girasole articiocco, a tasty potato-like tuber, was corrupted into “Jerusalem artichoke” in the mid-seventeenth century. The girasole part of the original name derives from Italian words meaning “turn,” as in gyroscope, and “sun,” as in solar. In short, the Jerusalem artichoke is not from the Holy Land, but rather is a “sunturmer,” its flower slowly rotating as it follows the arc of the sun. It’s curious, too, that the Jerusalem artichoke isn’t even a real artichoke. It was given that part of its name simply because its taste resembles that of the thorny edible thistle.

Non-European languages have been especially vulnerable to corruption by English speakers. When Columbus first made contact with the West Indies, he encountered a people who called themselves the Galibi. This name was corrupted by Europeans to Carib (from which we get Caribbean), which was then further corrupted to Caniba. When rumors reached England that these people feasted on one another, their corrupted name inspired the word “cannibal.” Shakespeare bent the word even further in The Tempest, where he names his brutish islander Caliban, an anagram of cannibal.

Even words of English origin are susceptible to corruption by anglophones. Back in the sixteenth century, the heart, liver, and intestines of a deer were called the “umbles.” Sometimes those organs were baked in pastry shells and sold as umble pies. Over time, however, this name was corrupted to “humble pie,” a change prompted partly by the English tendency to drop aitches (causing “humble” to be pronounced like “umble”) and partly by the lowly or humble nature of the dish. By the nineteenth century, the dish itself had fallen out of favor, but the phrase “to eat humble pie” persisted as a metaphor meaning to apologize for one’s arrogant mistakes.

Occasionally, people have become aware of an etymological corruption and have tried to undo the change. That happened with the word “asparagus,” which appeared in English in the early seventeenth century, but was then corrupted to “sparrow-grass” in the mid-seventeenth century. It retained that form until the mid-nineteenth century, when people were convinced by scholars to revert to the original “asparagus” spelling and pronunciation. Sometimes the impulse to “uncorrupt” a word can go haywire. The word “vittles” appeared in English in the fourteenth century, having been derived from the Old French vituaille. In the sixteenth century, however, scholars mistakenly decided that “vittles” was a corruption of the Latin victualia, and thus changed the spelling of “vittles” to “victuals.” These scholars did not intend the pronunciation of the word to change, but nonetheless the reading public eventually began to assume that vick-tyoo-als was the proper pronunciation and that vih-tahls was a vulgar pronunciation. As a result, you still hear people carefully pronouncing all the letters in “victuals,” even though this was never the original intention.