In a sixteenth-century poem by Scottish poet William Dunbar, an enamored young woman woos her beloved with these tender words:

My belly huddrun, my swete hurle bawsy,
My huny gukkis, my slawsy gawsy.

The young woman’s sweetheart is, understandably, deeply touched by this spontaneous effusion of sentiment, and is moved to reply in kind:

My tendir gyrle, my wallie gowdye,
My tyrlie myrlie, my crowdie mowdie.

Apart from the sheer beauty of these couplets, what is notable is that both passages employ terms of endearment drawn from the dinner table: “crowdie mowdie” was formerly the name of a kind of porridge, and “huny gukkis” is presumably a honey cake. In fact, food has been the inspiration of terms of endearment—also known as hypocorisms—for many centuries. Chances are that even you, dear reader, at some point in your romantic past, have addressed a significant other as “honey,” “sugar,” “sugar-pie,” “sweetie-pie,” “sweetheart,” “sweetie,” or just plain “sweetie.”

Some of these terms of endearment are, of course, older than others. For instance, as the name of a substance with a molecular formula of C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}, the word “sugar” has existed in English since the thirteenth century, but it wasn’t employed as a hypocorism until 1936. That’s about the same time that “sugar-pie,” “sweetie-pie,” and “sweet pea” were first murmured into a paramour’s ear. Much older is “sweetheart,” which first appeared in the thirteenth century; subsequent variants include “sweetikins,” from the sixteenth century, and “sweetling,” from the mid-seventeenth century:

“She is such a honey sweetikins,” wrote Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Nashe over four hundred years ago.

Not all food-related terms of endearment evoke the sweet tooth. “Powsoddy,” for example, is a sixteenth-century word denoting a broth made from a sheep’s head; the word may, in fact, have originated as a compound of “poll,” meaning “head,” and “sodden,” meaning “boiled.” However, this unappetizing origin did not prevent the young woman in the aforementioned poem by William Dunbar from incorporating the name of that dish into another rapturous address to her swain:

My claver, and my curdodie,
My huny soppis, my sweit possodie.

Equating the beloved to a boiled sheep’s head may seem peculiar, but so is equating him or her to a garden vegetable. Nonetheless, some spoony lovers, especially in Britain, have long bestowed the affectionate epithet of “cabbage” upon one another. That usage, like so many things pertaining to the amorous arts, arose in direct imitation of the French who, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, have addressed their lovers as “chou,” meaning “cabbage.” My pocket Berlitz, for instance, includes this helpful phrase: “O, mon petit chou, j’adore tes nouvelles chaussettes”—“Oh, my little cabbage, I love your new socks.” Calling your partner a piece of fried dough might also seem counter-intuitive. Nonetheless, that is exactly what couples did throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century, when they employed the word “crumpet” as a hypocorism: “I say, little crumpet, have you seen my cricket bat?”

The reason that “crumpet” ceased to be used as a term of endearment after about 1930 is that it developed into a collective noun that construed women as mere sexual objects. In other words, it became a term of sexual objectification. In other words, it became a term of sexual objectification. “That’s a nice bit of crumpet,” one man might say to another, pointing not to his breakfast plate, but to a woman across the room. Other food words, too, have been co-opted for a similar purpose, most obviously “meat.” For example, in Shakespeare’s Henry V Part 2, the aptly named Doll Tearsheet rejects the advances of Pistol in favor of Falstaff by saying, “Away, you mouldy rogue, away! I am meat for your master.” The specific names of various kinds of meat were similarly employed as terms of objectification, including “mutton,” “beef,” and “fish,” all of which make an
appearance in Shakespeare’s plays. In Measure for Measure, Lucio claims that the Duke would “eat mutton on Fridays,” meaning that he would partake of wanton women even on holy days; in the same play, Pompey Bum says that Mistress Overdone has “eaten up all her beef,” meaning that she has worn out her flesh servicing clients; and in Hamlet, Polonius is called a “fishmonger,” a cant synonym for “pimp,” that is, for someone who procures “fish” for lecherous men. Even specific names of fish were used to objectify women: “ling,” a type of cod, is used this way in All’s Well that Ends Well, where the clown contrasts country women with courtly women: “Our old ling and our Isbels o’ th’ country are nothing like your old ling and your Isbels o’ th’ court.” Even “dish,” which sounds so contemporary thanks to the adjective “dishy,” was used in Shakespeare’s time to denote wanton women: in Antony and Cleopatra, Enobarbus disparagingly refers to the Queen of the Nile as an “Egyptian dish.”

Thankfully, there are plenty of other food words that have a positive, rather than pejorative, role in the world of love, including “toothsome” and “scrumptious.” The first of those words originated in the mid-sixteenth century to denote tasty food, a morsel that is pleasing to the tooth. The application of “toothsome” to people is very recent, as evidenced by the fact that my American Heritage Dictionary includes “sexually alluring” as one of its senses, but my Oxford English Dictionary does not. “Scrumptious” has also developed new senses: it likely derived from a source meaning “stingy,” and then underwent several shifts in meaning. In the early nineteenth century it came to describe stylish things; in the early twentieth century it came to describe delicious food; and in the early twenty-first century it apparently came to describe me—the latter usage of “scrumptious,” however, may be a very regional use, limited to the peculiar speech patterns of my wife.