I originally intended to devote this column to gastronomic eponyms—that is, to food names and culinary terms that derive from the names of famous people. Had I done so, I would have spent only a few seconds on beef Wellington, since most people already know how that dish was named in honour of Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, after he defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. I would likewise have paid scant attention to peach Melba: the tale of how French chef Auguste Escoffier created that dessert for opera singer Dame Nellie Melba is already familiar. I might, however, have attempted to spice up the dessert’s history by noting that Dame Melba’s real name was Helen Mitchell and that Melba was a stage name she adopted to honour Melbourne, the Australian city where she was born in 1861.

After quickly dispensing with shop-worn food eponyms like beef Wellington and peach Melba, I probably would have delved into less-familiar territory, such as foods and kitchen devices whose names derive from mythological figures. It would have been interesting, for example, to mention that our Victorian predecessors gave the name “tantalus” to a special kind of wine decanter: bottles locked within a tantalus could be seen but not opened (not, at least, by sneaky servants), much as King Tantalus was condemned by the gods to stand in water that forever receded from his lips, even as the grapes hanging above his head shrank from his grasp. I would also have mentioned the legendary Romulus and noted that his name is eternized not just in Rome itself, the city that he and his brother supposedly founded, but also in foods such as romano cheese and romaine lettuce. I would have then added a sentence or two referring to Tingis, the daughter of Atlas, who held the heavens on his shoulders; Tingis’s name, I would have related, is said by some to be the origin of Tangier, the Moroccan city through which a certain kind of orange was imported: the tangerine. Finally, I might have concluded the mythological section of my food-eponym column by alluding to Mary, the sister of Moses, whose name is represented in the cooking utensil known as the bain-marie. I would have pointed out that medieval alchemists called this utensil *balneum mariae*, meaning “Mary’s bath,” inspired by their belief that Mary dabbled in magic. I would then have made a wry observation, as I explained how the *balneum mariae* became nothing more than a French cooking pot, as the study of alchemy dwindled over the centuries.

At that point in my column, I undoubtedly would have moved on to several gastronomic words inspired by people with rather ludicrous claims on food history. I might have included James H. Salisbury, a nineteenth-century physician who recommended that his patients eat ground beef three times a day and whose name is now attached to Salisbury steak. And of course I would have mentioned Horace Fletcher, another nineteenth-century food visionary, who advocated chewing each bite thirty-two times, a practice that became known as “fletcherism.”

Such a column will never be, however, because as I undertook my research I became sidetracked for several days by a specific eponymic puzzle. Let me explain. Tradition says that the foodstuff now known as the sandwich acquired its name in the early 1760s from John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, supposedly because that is the only thing he ate while sitting at the gambling table for twenty-four hours straight. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* backs up this origin and cites a quotation from 1762 as the first use of “sandwich” with this culinary sense. However, here’s the rub: surely sandwiches existed long before John Montagu sat down to play cards. The earl could not have been the first person in England to hit upon the idea of placing a bit of meat between two pieces of bread. What, then, were sandwiches called before they were sandwiches? After combing through hundreds of texts, mostly plays, that were written long before the Earl of Sandwich was even born, a possible (though somewhat prosaic) answer emerges. The sandwich appears to have been simply known as “bread and meat” or “bread and cheese.” These two phrases are found throughout English drama from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For example, in an anonymous late sixteenth-century play called *Love and Fortune*, a young man pleads for “a peecie of bread and meate for Gods sake.” Around the same time, in *The Old Wives Tale* by George Peele, a character confesses, “I tooke a peecie of bread and cheese, and came my way.”
Shakespeare uses the phrase, too, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Nim announces, “I love not the humour of bread and cheese.” A slightly later anonymous play, known as *The Knave in Grain*, includes a pedlar called a “bread and meat man” in its dramatis personae, and Thomas Heywood’s seventeenth-century version of *The Rape of Lucrece* includes a song made up of the cries of street peddlars, including, “Bread and—meat—bread—and meat.” Dozens of other plays from the same era also make reference to “bread and meat” or “bread and cheese.” Significantly, the internal sequence is never reversed: none of the hundreds of plays I consulted employed the phrase “meat and bread” or “cheese and bread.” The frequency of these two phrases, along with their consistent internal sequence, would suggest, then, that a hungry sixteenth-century peasant, dreaming of roast beef on rye, would have called that snack nothing more imaginative than “bread and meat.”