Missing Delicacies

The *Oxford English Dictionary* aims to include an entry for every word that has ever existed in the English language. Thus, in the *OED* you will find entries for long-obsolete food words such as *lachanopoll* (a greengrocer) and *groaning-cake* (food provided to those attending a woman in labor), as well as for obscure words such as *skinker* (a bartender) and *abliguration* (excessive expense on food and drink). The *OED* also attempts to catalog recent additions to the language. Thus, in 2004, the editors added hundreds of new entries, including *nummies* (delicious foodstuffs), *pruno* (prison slang for alcohol brewed in one’s cell), and *omakase* (a menu choice in which the chef decides what the customer will be served).

Still, despite its avowed goal of being exhaustive and all-encompassing, I’ve often noted that many of the foods that I frequently devour are absent from the pages of the *OED*.

To my mind, the most egregious omission is the *pierogi*: in my neighborhood—the north end of Winnipeg, which originated in the early twentieth century as a ghetto for Eastern Europeans—I am a stone’s throw, or at most an arrow’s shot, from three different vendors whose sole *raison d’etre* is the manufacture, sale, and celebration of the *pierogi*. Indeed, in my world *pierogies* are so pervasive that I feel foolish explaining what they are—doing so seems tantamount to explaining the function of a spoon or whisk, an insult to your culinary intelligence. However, on the remote chance that an editor of the *OED* is reading this column, I will attest that a *pierogi* is a kind of dumpling that contains any one of several fillings, such as potato and cheddar cheese, potato and cottage cheese, or potato and more potato. They can be deep-fried, pan-fried, or even boiled, but they must be served with sour cream and fried onions. As for their name, it comes from Polish, where *pierogi* is the plural of *pierog*. In turn, this Polish word may have been borrowed from one of the Turkic languages, perhaps when the Mongols invaded eastern Europe in the thirteenth century. Turkish, for example, contains the word *börek*, meaning “pie,” which is actually not as different from *pierogi* as one might think: it’s easy to turn “b” (a voiced bilabial stop) into “p” (a voiceless bilabial stop), just as it’s easy to turn “k” (a voiceless velar stop) into “g” (a voiced velar stop). Make these changes, and—presto—*börek* becomes *poreg*, a mere hop, skip, and jump from the Polish *pierog* and its plural *pierogi*. In English the form of the word has continued to mutate. While “pierogi” is the most common English spelling (a Google search returns 152,000 hits), alternatives are not uncommon, including *

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*pierogi* (11,700 hits), *perogie* (3,850 hits), *piroghee* (662 hits), and *perogey* (a mere 100 hits, even though this is how the word is spelled on the sign at Anne’s *Perogey Palace*, just down the street).

The *OED* is also surely remiss in not including an entry for *poutine*, a dish made by covering french fries with curds (or melted cheddar) and then drizzling the whole thing with gravy. Reputedly invented in Warwick, Quebec, in 1957, *poutine* has become such a Canadian staple that Burger King franchises in Canada have added it to their menu. Outside of Canada, though, the word remains mostly unknown, despite achieving some international notoriety in 2000, when a comedian posing as a journalist asked George W. Bush whether he appreciated an endorsement from Canada’s prime minister, Jean Poutine. Apparently unaware that the prime minister’s real name was Jean
Chrétien, the presidential candidate replied, “I appreciate his strong statement….I want to make sure our relationship with our most important neighbor to the north is strong.” As for the origin of the word *poutine*, the name appears to be a French corruption of the English word *pudding*. It should be noted, though, that when French Canadians applied the word *pudding* to this cholesterol-laden concoction, they didn’t have in mind the sweet desserts that we now associate with that word but rather the savory entrées that the term originally denoted, as in blood pudding or black pudding.

Other familiar food words snubbed by the *OED* include *calzone*, a disk of pizza dough that is loaded with meat and cheese and then folded into a half-moon and crimped shut before baking or frying. The resulting shape may have inspired the name: in Italian *calzone* means “trouser leg,” and the plump pastry may have reminded its Neapolitan inventors of a billowing pantaloons.

My favorite culinary mushrooms also get short shrift from the *OED*: *shiitake*, *porcini*, and *portobello* are nowhere to be found. The Japanese name of the first of these, *shiitake*, means “oak mushroom,” so called because the golden-capped fungus grows on the surface of those fallen trees. As for *portobello*, that’s actually the North American name for a large brown mushroom that in Italy is known as the *capellone*, meaning “big hat.” In contrast, the name *portobello* means “beautiful harbor.” It’s thought that the name change from *capellone* to *portobello* might have been the doing of some savvy importer, who rechristened the fungus to make it more enticing to American consumers. If so, *portobello* may have been chosen simply because it’s a familiar place name: there’s a Portobello in Panama, in Scotland, in Nova Scotia, and in Sardinia, to name only a few. The name change may also have been influenced by *prataiolo*, the name of an Italian meadow mushroom.

If the reasons behind the name *portobello* are a bit unclear, so too are they with *porcini*. That mushroom’s name undoubtedly means “piglets,” but it’s not certain why such a name was bestowed: some say it alludes to the fat little stems of the fungus; others say that pigs were used to sniff it out in the wild; and still others say that slices of moist porcini, when tossed onto a hot frying pan, will squeal like little pigs. In any event, the swinish ancestry of *porcini* makes it a distant cousin of *porcupine* (which means “spiny pig”), of *porpoise* (which means “pig fish”), and even of *porcelain* (the Italians gave the name *porcella* to a seashell whose contours reminded them of the external genitalia of female pigs; this word entered French as *porcelaine*, a fine china whose sheen and color resembles the seashell).

Finally, a food word that originated in the United States is also spurned by the editors of the *OED*. The word in question, *turducken*, denotes a dish made by stuffing a reddish sausage mixture into a boneless chicken; then stuffing the chicken, along with a yellowish cornbread mixture, into a duck; then stuffing the duck, along with a greenish oyster mixture, into a semiboneless turkey. The monstrosity is then cooked for twelve hours before being sliced open to reveal variously colored concentric circles, rather like a tree ring. As a dish, turducken traces its lineage back to nineteenth-century Cajun cuisine, but it was only in the early 1980s that renowned chef Paul Prudhomme introduced it to a wider audience of gastronomes. It was also around that time that the dish came to be known as *turducken*, a word that obviously combines various syllables from *turkey*, *duck*, and *chicken*. In hindsight, however, the inventors of the word might have been wiser to create a name with a more appetizing first syllable.