Once upon a time the streets of London were alive with the sounds of vendors crying their wares.

Had-had-had-had-haddock! All fresh and good! Penny a lot, fine russets.
Chestnuts all 'ot, a penny a score.
One-a-penny, two-a-penny, hot-cross buns!
Hot spiced gingerbread, smoking hot!
Cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh!

Although gone from the streets, the buxom apple-cheeked milkmaids with lace-trimmed petticoats peeking out beneath their skirts and the handsome young pie sellers with shiny buckles on their shoes live on in songs and storybooks, on stage and screen. They seem to have been ubiquitous in those long-ago days. Yet when author Henry Mayhew wrote about them in 1851, he said the vendors were “a large body of persons of whom the public has less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth.”

Well-to-do Londoners had little direct contact with street peddlers but appear to have been fascinated by them. They collected pictures of peddlers and bought illustrated books of street cries for themselves as well as for their children.

The first illustrations of street peddlers, wrote Sean Shesgreen in Images of the Outcast, date back to the fifteenth century when they appeared on broadsides. One was among Samuel Pepys’s collection. In the late seventeenth century artists introduced sets of prints suitable for framing. Although some artists drew the street hawkers as they were, others idealized and sentimentalized the vendors. Many of the prints were fashion plates, with details changing from edition to edition as hat crowns shrank in height and shoe buckles replaced bows.

During the eighteenth century the criers and their cries were immortalized in books that taught children their ABCs or moral lessons. One, The Cries of London; or Child’s Moral Instructor, was “intended at once to make Instruction Pleasing; and unite Humour with Decency,” according to the title page. More sanctimonious than humorous, the book described an asparagus hawker as an overcharging deceiver and called a lobster seller a snuff addict. However, it assured good little children that they would be rewarded with “golden fruits” from the cherry seller.

The first adults’ books of cries appeared in 1804. Intended for “rich bibliophiles, antiquarians, connoisseurs and print collectors,” they also described the hawkers in unflattering terms. One book warned that the cherry sellers’ “weights are generally to be questioned” and revealed that the vendor of watercress actually sold “a weed very dissimilar in quality.” Despite the warnings about their unsavory character traits, the criers were still depicted as charming, bucolic peasants.

However, even in the seventeenth century when the hawkers actually were still farmers selling their own produce, it’s doubtful that they looked quite as fresh and well groomed as they did in most of the drawings. Strawberry sellers, for example, typically walked five miles or more to market carrying forty pounds of berries. By the nineteenth century London was a sprawling metropolis, the countryside was ever farther away, and farm products were shipped in by rail and then distributed from large markets such as Covent Garden. Street hawkers were no longer peasants; they were city...
dwellers who occupied the lowest rung of the food sellers’ ladder. They bought the dregs from the markets after the shopkeepers took what they needed and the servants from grand families did their shopping. The street vendors sold the leftovers to those who were hardly better off than they.6

Everything imaginable was cried on the streets, including services like rat catching or chimney sweeping and household products such as teapots and nutmeg graters. Peddlers of fruits, vegetables, fish, and other edibles came to be called “costermongers.” The term, originally used for apple peddlers, came from “costard,” a large ribbed English apple variety, and “monger” or seller. All sorts of foods were cried, and many of the cries as well as the foods that went with them are still familiar to us. We have hot cross buns and mussels (if seldom cockles), and hot chestnuts are still sold on a few streets. But what did the cries “A dip and a wallop for a bawbee” and “Buy my rumps and burrs” refer to?

In Old London Street Cries Andrew W. Tuer told of a man who carried a leg of mutton through the streets. For half a penny (a bawbee) he would dip the leg into the customer’s pail of hot water and swish it around to create a thin soup. The cry “A dip and a wallop for a bawbee” brought “gude-wives to their doors with pails of boiling water, which was in this manner converted into ‘broth.’”7

Rumps and burrs were, respectively, the fleshy part of the tail and the inside of the ear of an ox. Before the ox went to the tanner, these parts were removed, seasoned, and baked. Tuer, who apparently never tried them himself, reported that they were “said to have formed a cheap and appetizing dish.”8

Clearly these were foods of the poor. According to accounts of the day, the lives of the hawkers and their customers were truly Dickensian. Illiteracy was the norm, bread and tea constituted a meal, and children typically began working at the age of seven or eight. Tuer said of one peddler, “What with the envious complaints of the small shopkeepers whom he undersells, and the supercilious rebuffs of the policeman who keeps him dodging about and always ‘on the move,’ Bill has a hard time of it indeed.”9

Henry Mayhew was a London journalist and one of the founders of the British humor magazine Punch. In his groundbreaking work London Labour & the London Poor, first published in 1851, he introduced the reality of the street vendors’ lives to the public. His goal was to report on what he called “the undiscovered country of the poor.”10 Hoping to encourage those in high places to improve the plight of the impoverished, he interviewed scores of people and recorded what they ate and drank and how they dressed. He described their homes and their work, calculated their incomes, and added up their expenses. Best of all, from the vantage of the twenty-first century, he quoted them. So we have their thoughts and ideas in their own words.

Mayhew wrote that it was nearly impossible to make a living on the streets and said that most peddlers were just one step away from the workhouse. So it’s no wonder that many of them admitted that cheating was routine and that those who didn’t cheat didn’t survive. In fact, one told Mayhew he felt sorry for those who weren’t “up to the dodges of the business….They don’t find a living, it’s only another way of starving.”11

Topping up was one of the tricks of the costermongers’ trade, and it gave the phrase “top-quality” new meaning. Vendors bought cheap poor-quality apples and mixed them with a few good ones, making sure the good ones were on the top of the bushel. Then they sold them all as superior apples. They sprinkled a handful of beautiful English cherries atop heaps of lower-quality Dutch ones. A basket topped with luscious strawberries might have been mostly overripe berries and cabbage leaves under the top layer. “All the salesmen in the markets tops up,” claimed one vendor. “It’s only making the best of it.”12

Some of the costermongers told Mayhew they didn’t adulterate foods “like the tradesmen” but they did “slang” them. That is, they measured quantities in containers that gave less than full weight or measure. A slang pint, with a thick bottom, measured out three-quarters of a pint; a slang quart held a pint and a half. These containers were used chiefly to measure nuts, “of which the proper quantity is hardly ever given to the purchaser,” said Mayhew. But, as peddlers told him, “People just brings it on themselves, by wanting things for next to nothing.”11

The costermongers had a code of honor among themselves, but they believed it was acceptable to cheat the Irish vendors, many of whom were destitute having left Ireland to escape famine. One vendor described them to Mayhew by saying, “They’ll work for nothing and live upon less.”14 Another London costermonger said he boiled oranges to make them look bigger and juicier and then sold them to “Irish hawkers as wasn’t wide awake, for stunning big uns.”15 Boiled oranges turned dark and spoiled within a short time, making them worthless for resale. In general, orange sellers had a bad reputation. They were accused of gambling, intimidating buyers, and selling gin on the side. Oranges were sold in theaters as well as on the street, and buyers threw nearly as many at actors as they ate.16

Eel, which was sold either already cooked or while still alive, was very popular in London at the time. Unscrupulous eel mongers were known for their practice of dumping as many as twenty pounds of dead eels amid five pounds of...
squirming live ones and selling them all as “large live eels.” Since they got the dead eels free from wholesalers, the profit was excellent.17 One justified the practice by saying, “Nearly all fish is dead before it’s cooked, and why not eels?”18

Why not indeed? Lackluster herring were displayed under candlelight to give them “a good reflection.” Prunes were boiled to make them look plump and shiny. Filberts were baked to give them a rich sheen.19 This was nothing new. A century earlier French confectioner M. Emy had warned that unscrupulous dealers soaked old, dried-up vanilla beans in oil to make them look fresh and new.20

While those practices were, in a way, fairly straightforward, some frauds of the day were so complex and labor intensive it’s surprising they were worth doing. People made fake peppercorns by combining linseed oil, clay, and cayenne pepper and pressing the mixture through a sieve. Then they mixed the fakes in with a few real peppercorns. To test your peppercorns, you could put them in water. The fakes would fall apart, while the real ones would stay whole.21 False nutmegs were made from a mixture of bran, clay, and nutmeg refuse.22 Real nutmegs weren’t necessarily good either. A Moroccan spice seller told Mayhew that hawkers often sold whole nutmegs that previously were infused in spirits to make extract. Before you buy one, he said, stick a pin in it. If oil runs out, it’s good. If it doesn’t, it’s been soaked and will have little or no flavor left.23

As a rule, it was safer to buy whole spices because those sold already ground or mixed offered “a temptation to roguery,” wrote George Dodd in his 1856 book The Food of London.24 Typically, expensive spices would be cut with a cheaper substance or, as they said at the time, “sophisticated.”

The Moroccan spice seller admitted that he bought ground ginger that was already sophisticated with cheap pea flour. Pea flour, he explained, is the same color as ginger but has no aroma. “Two ounces of ginger will give the smell to one pound of pea flour,” he said. He saw no problem with selling his diluted ginger for the price of the real thing, telling Mayhew that he didn’t cheat his customers.25

Ground ginger was also made from gingerroot that had already been used to flavor ginger beer and, as a result, was nearly tasteless. Powdered bones were added to ground pepper. Mustard rarely contained more than 20 percent mustard seed in the 1850s, according to The Oxford Companion to Food. It was padded with wheat or pea flour, linseed meal, and plaster of Paris, colored with turmeric, and spiced with cayenne pepper.26

Although it was illegal, costermongers even recycled tea leaves. They bought used tea leaves from servants in large houses, from keepers of tea or coffee shops, and from charwomen who used them to tamp down the dust on carpets when they cleaned. The costermongers simply dried the black tea leaves and sold them as new. Green tea leaves needed a little extra attention. They were also dried, and then, “to give the ‘green’ hue, a preparation of copper is used,” according to Mayhew.27 The irony, said Mayhew, was that the spurious tea was generally sold to the same poor people who collected the used leaves—charwomen, washerwomen, and their families.28

Mixing tea leaves with sloe or other leaves was also common. According to Dodd, some Chinese dealers adulterated tea before it left their shores by filling out a tea shipment with ash and plum leaves. Dodd said the Chinese believed that “barbarians” who were so lacking in taste as to put cream and sugar in tea wouldn’t know the difference.29

Coffee became more popular in London after 1824 when import duties were reduced and coffee prices dropped accordingly. However, Mayhew pointed out that lower prices were also possible because coffee was so easy to adulterate. Mostly coffee sellers used chicory, a lot of chicory. Some coffee was 90 percent chicory, 10 percent coffee. Unlike the coffee vendors of New Orleans who boast of their blend, the Londoners did not mention their addition.

Other surreptitious sophistications in coffee included ground rye, roasted carrots, scorched peas, acorns, and mahogany sawdust. Burnt sugar enriched the color of coffee that had been sophisticated. The oddest addition was liver. Some people reportedly baked and then ground the livers of oxen and horses and sold the powdered liver to be blended with coffee.30

Long before Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd alerted us to the contents of meat pies, people suspected the worst. That’s why they called the pies “covered uncertainties.”31 Sondheim’s Mrs. Lovett made her pies with everything from cats to priests, and although priests may be an exaggeration, cats were thought to be a common ingredient. Passersby often greeted the pie man by calling “mee-yow” or “bow-wow-wow.”32

When sales were hard to come by, pie men resorted to tossing for a pie. The customer would toss a coin, and if he lost, he would pay the price of the pie without receiving one. If the customer won, he’d get the pie free. Often rather than eat it, he’d throw it at his friends—or at the pie man. Even as Mayhew was questioning the contents of pies, Dodd was reporting the pie man’s demise. In the past, he wrote, the pie man “was a wag, with a dash of shrewdness in him, and a fondness for pitch-and-toss with his customers. Whether flour became too dear, or whether pie men became less honest, it appears that hot penny pies first deteriorated
in quality, and then gradually disappeared, or nearly so, from among the street viands. They have been replaced by the pies of regular shopkeepers, men who make a formidable display, and boast of plate-glass windows.”

Times were changing. By the end of the nineteenth century, costermongers were being pushed aside by shopkeepers. New means of transport, refrigeration, and modern food production methods were changing the way food was bought and sold both in the shops and on the streets. According to Tuer (whose book was published in 1885), costermongers were gone from the better areas of London. “In the back streets of second and third rate neighborhoods,” cries of “Chestnuts all ‘ot!” “Fine ripe strawberries!” and “Fine oranges, a penny for three!” were still “shouted in due season by leathern-lunged itinerant traders.” But in many parts of London, he reported, the cry of the omnibus conductor was drowning out that of the costermonger.

Tuer wrote Old London Street Cries to document the cries because some were on the verge of extinction while others lived only in children’s books. No longer, he wrote, did vendors cry, “One a penny, two a penny, hot cross buns!” on Good Friday. Hot spiced gingerbread, once considered “a very pleasing regale to the pedestrians of London in cold and gloomy evenings,” was found only at village fairs, and even then it was served cold. As for the pie man, his cry of “Hot pies!” was relegated to the “games of the modern baby learning to speak, who is taught by his nurse to raise his hand to imitate a call now never heard.”

NOTES
3. Ibid., 151-155.
6. Ibid., 382-384.
8. Ibid., 38.
9. Ibid., 46.
11. Ibid., 10.
13. Ibid., 7–72.
17. Ibid., 92.
19. Ibid., 97.
31. Tuer, Old London Street Cries, 111.
32. Mayhew, The Street Trader’s Lot, 73.
34. Tuer, Old London Street Cries, 60–70.
35. Shesgreen, Images of the Outcast, 159.
36. Tuer, Old London Street Cries, 111.