Boning Up on Language

“I got into a beef with the big cheese and told him he wasn’t fit to be top banana since he couldn’t cut the mustard. Now I’m in a real pickle because I lost my plum job and I’m running out of dough!” That exciting opening to my yet-to-be-written culinary bildungsroman demonstrates how the English language has appropriated dozens of food-related words and turned them to new, and often strange, use. In many cases, the reason for the semantic extension of the food term is obvious. For example, when we “butter up” our boss (something we’ve been doing since the early eighteenth century when that idiom first appeared), we are metaphorically applying a lubricating dairy product in order to mollify an otherwise intractable individual. Likewise, it’s easy to understand why “goose,” in the 1880s, became a verb meaning “to inflict an unwanted pinch or poke on someone’s buttocks,” because that is exactly what that creature will do when you run afoul of it. You might call that last pun corny, an idiom that arose in the 1930s because corn was associated with rustic country folk whose facile attempts at humor were considered trite and hackneyed. Plums, however, have long been prized, especially when baked into a pie or pudding, and thus the name of that fruit has been used as an adjective meaning “fantastic” since the late eighteenth century, as in “I landed a plum job.” (That sense of “plum” also lurks in the background of a well-known nursery rhyme: when Little Jack Horner, sitting with his Christmas pie, sticks in his thumb, pulls out a plum, and cries “What a good boy am I!” there is a veiled reference to an underhanded appropriation of a desirable land title by some sixteenth-century steward.) Since the mid-seventeenth century, the word “stew” has also been used for obvious reasons to describe someone who is in a state of chafing anxiety, first in idioms such as “to stew like oysters in their own water” and later in familiar constructions such as “I stewed over my credit card debt.” Often a food word will be borrowed into more than one new context. “Pepper” because it is sprinkled, became a verb meaning “to pelt with artillery fire” in the mid-seventeenth century, it became a verb meaning “to infect with venereal disease,” because of the burning sensation that the seasoning can induce. More recently, in the 1970s, the field of psychiatry began to use the word “vegetable” as a label for individuals who have ceased to manifest cognitive functions. The 1970s also saw the sporting world borrow the world “bagel” to denote a score of zero, and only in the last year has “pod” been absorbed into the neologism “podcast,” a kind of Web-based broadcast. With these last two examples, the reason for the semantic extension is again obvious: bagels are shaped like zeros, and podcasts, like pea pods, are small and self-contained.

In other cases, the connection between the new use of a food word and its original sense is less apparent, at least at first glance. Why do we refer to a head honcho as a big cheese? The answer is that that “cheese” actually comes from the Hindi word chiz, meaning “thing”—he’s the big cheese, the real thing. Why does a sixteen-year-old outfielder tell her parents, “We creamed the other team!”? Perhaps, as some slang dictionaries suggest, because cream rises to the top. A better explanation, I think, considering the aggressive nature of many sports, is that cream often gets beaten or whipped. Why, too, have we “boned up” for exams since the mid-nineteenth century? There would seem to be no

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link between scholarly diligence and the skeletal segments that we boil for soup stock, until we recall one of the other nineteenth-century functions of bone, or at least of whale bone: to stiffen corsets. Boning up such undergarments made them strong and self-supporting, which is what study does for the mind. It might seem strange, as well, that “dough” and “bread” have both been used as slang equivalents for “money,” the former since the mid-nineteenth century and the latter since the 1940s. I’m tempted, of course, to propose that “dough” came to denote money because we “knead” it. More seriously, the famous philologist Eric Partridge suggested that “bread” is a clipped form of “bread and honey,” which is Cockney rhyming slang for “money.” It’s most probable, however, that for many people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bread and dough were simply what money was typically exchanged for. The average laborer didn’t toil to pile up money but to procure bread for his family. He was, literally, the breadwinner, a phrase that dates back to the early nineteenth century.

“Fruit,” “ham,” and “beef” also have curious semantic extensions into nonculinary contexts. “Fruit” has been used as a pejorative name for male homosexuals since at least the 1930s. Prior to that, the word had been used to denote promiscuous women, thanks to the notion that they were “ripe for picking.” The shift in application, from promiscuous women to homosexual men, follows a common sociolinguistic pattern: for instance, “faggot” originally referred to women, as did, of course, given names such as “Molly” and “Sheila,” which eventually came to denote gay men. In the theatrical world, “ham” has denoted an overacting actor since the late nineteenth century. The usage is thought to have arisen from the term “ham fat man,” which appeared in a minstrel song written in 1863. In that song, the “ham fat man” is a second-rate performer, the kind who could afford only ham fat to remove his makeup. Also in the nineteenth century, “beef” became a verb meaning “to complain” or “to gripe,” as in “He’s always beefing about his workload.” This semantic development may have been motivated by the mere fact that cattle get ornery when they are being branded, wrestled to ground by the horns, or coaxed into a meat grinder. In fact, the earliest instance of this use of “beef” (from 1888) implies just such a connection: “He’ll beef an’ kick like a steer.” However, a more convoluted explanation proposes that the “gripe” sense of “beef” developed from the idiom “to cry beef,” which existed in England in the eighteenth century. “To cry beef” meant “to raise the alarm,” and it’s thought by some that the original form of the idiom was “to cry hot beef.” In turn, “Hot beef!” was supposedly a mocking corruption of “Stop, thief!” In other words, when a frantic Londoner shouted “Stop, thief! Stop, thief! Stop, thief!” in pursuit of a suspected pickpocket, the nearby hooligans and rascals would customarily take up the cry as “Hot beef! Hot beef!” All of this might sound implausible, but recall the equally unlikely series of events that transpired in 1984: the fast-food chain known as Wendy’s developed a television commercial in which a petite octogenarian criticized rival hamburger restaurants by querying, “Where’s the beef?” Soon, that catchphrase was cropping up in talk show jokes, appearing on T-shirts and bumper stickers, and being endlessly parroted by millions of vacuous consumers. The phrase even wormed its way into national politics in the spring of 1984 when Democratic nominee Walter Mondale used it to ridicule the supposedly insubstantial ideas of Gary Hart. The press loved the jab and gave it much air time, and Hart’s campaign thereafter wilted.

As for other extensions of food words, their raison d’etre remains obscure. For example, no one knows why it was the banana, and not the coconut or papaya, that was incorporated into such idioms as “top banana” and “second banana.” And why photographers ask us to say “cheese”—instead of “cherries” or “fleas” or “Pyrenees”—will likely remain one of life’s small mysteries.
As renaissance culture grew more secular in the wake of the Reformation, painters and poets expanded their thematic repertoires to include subjects drawn from the natural world and from daily life. In the visual arts, landscape and still life slowly emerged from narrative representation despite the low status held by such subjects in the aesthetic hierarchy. With history painting remaining so dominant, artists drawn to genre frequently “justified” their efforts by overlaying them with historical and allegorical allusions. Thus, in the realm of still-life painting, some pictures were made in imitation of ancient xenia, others incorporated relevant moral and social commentary, and still others fashioned clever visual puns from ordinary foodstuffs. One sixteenth-century artist, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, went so far as to make a career of creating human “portraits” out of common produce, while a handful of painters made pointed references to the sexually suggestive shapes of certain fruits and vegetables. Highlighting the erotic associations of figs, peaches, melons, and squash was particularly common in the era that began with Raphael (1483–1520) and ended with Caravaggio (1571–1610).

Witty puns of all kinds flourished in the sixteenth century, a period whose political and spiritual instability led to unresolved tensions between a nominally empirical epistemology and a propensity for allusion and dissimulation that never lay far beneath the surface. Renaissance “learned erotica,” as opposed to popular pornography, was especially steeped in metaphors, puns, and elaborate rhetorical devices.\(^1\) Already in the fifteenth century, Poggio Bracciolini anthologized the best jokes of his day—some of them quite naughty and anticlerical—in a volume he called the Facetiae (1450). Three-quarters of a century later, Baldassare Castiglione devoted a long section of his Book of the Courtier (1528) to cataloging the many forms of wit with which he thought a gentleman should be familiar. Many of these turned upon what, in his words, was “a hidden meaning quite different from the one we seem to intend,” as “when one thing is said another is tacitly understood.”\(^2\) More than one modern study has examined Renaissance erotica with this perspective in mind.\(^3\)

The humorous potential of fruit and vegetables may have been further grounded in the popular belief that the shapes of certain plants were inherently anthropomorphic. This notion, the so-called doctrine of signatures, had been known for centuries by herbalists searching for signs to the efficacy of God’s creations.\(^4\) The idea gained currency in 1588 with the publication of Giambattista Della Porta’s Phytognomica, a semiscientific volume with illustrations that compared various botanical species with human organs.\(^5\) Together, wit and pseudoscience sustained the metaphorical play of food and sex for nearly a century, beginning in the High Renaissance and ending in the early years of the seventeenth century. In papal Rome, demographically the most male of European cities, sexual puns were more widespread than anywhere else.

The first painted still lifes to carry an erotic charge seem to have originated within the circle of Raphael. Garlands of fruit and flowers abound in the decorative surrounds of frescoes in the Loggia di Psyche at the former Villa Chigi (now

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It's off-color wit was perhaps the perfect metaphor for the culture of post-Reformation Rome, a culture whose quest for religious and political orthodoxy frequently led to further uncertainties, and where humor alone offered an acceptable outlet for transgressive desire.