Food Idioms for Thought

by Hannah Scott (Editing and Publishing '22)

EVER WONDERED WHERE we get all our food idioms? From "spill the beans" to "slow as molasses," most languages are full to the brim with them. Figuring out how these idioms came into use can be a hard nut to crack, especially if you are not certain what they mean.

Often you can guess at an idiom's etymology, but other times it can be a thorny question. Take the saying, "apple of my eye." The meaning in context is transparent, but, literally speaking, it is a bit odd to compare someone you are proud or fond of to an apple stuck in your eyeball. Here are some interesting food idioms and their origins. We have included many in English, but also some in Spanish, German, French, Korean, and Japanese.

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English Food Idioms

To not know beans: to not know anything about a subject. Comes from a seventeenth-century association of beans with something small or worthless. First use recorded in Asa Greene's 1833 book *The Life and Adventures of Dr. Dodimus Duckworth*.

Meat and potatoes: something seen as a staple, foundational, or fundamental component. Comes from the idea that meat and potatoes are a basic or standard food grouping. First idiomatic occurrence in 1977 when a *Rolling Stone* journalist wrote, "Vocal harmonies are the meat and potatoes of California's pop identity."

To lay an egg: to fail. Originally from British slang, a "goose egg" or "duck egg" indicating a score of zero or a failing score. Comes from egg-shaped zeros on cricket scoreboards. Not to be confused with getting a *goose egg*, which can mean a bump on the head that is shaped similar to a goose egg.

A big cheese: originally, a wealthy and respectable collective or society (1850s); contemporarily, an important or self-important person. Theorized to originate with publicity stunts in the early twentieth century, where a giant wheel of cheese would be ceremonially cut up and served by someone who was important. Today, the idiom typically refers to one's boss in a casual and sometimes disparaging tone.

From soup to nuts: from start to finish, everything; similar to the phrase "from A to Z." Figurative, from the successive parts of a grand meal, beginning with a soup course and ending with a course of light nuts and fruits. Originated in the United States. First written occurrence in *Won in the Ninth* (1910) by Christy Mathewson, a baseball player and author from New England.

To spill the beans: to reveal a secret. Origin unknown, but theorized to have come from ancient Greek voting practices. Citizens voted privately by putting a colored or white bean into a jar to indicate a positive or negative vote; knocking over the filled jar prematurely (intentionally or not) would spoil the vote's results.

Slow as molasses: painfully, dreadfully slow. Origin unclear. First colloquial use in the 1870s as "slow as molasses in January." Molasses is thick and viscous, and it pours very slowly from the jar but is especially slow when it is cold.

Apple of my eye: something you are very fond of. The terms "apple" and "pupil" (the part of the eye that grants vision) likely descended from the same Anglo-Saxon word, *arppel*. The King James Version of the Bible uses this idiom in translation of the Hebrew writing, which actually translates more closely to "the little man of his eye," referring to the reflection of yourself in another's eye.

Bread and butter: a basic necessity or something very important; someone's income or livelihood. Bread has been a staple food for centuries—a basic necessity at the dinner table.

Cool as a cucumber: acting calm and unexcited. The saying stems from a cucumber's freshness and cold temperature inside, despite any hotter conditions outside. First recorded in John Gay's "A New Song of New Similes" in 1732.

Peanut gallery: a group of people who criticize someone or something, typically by focusing on insignificant details. Historically, a peanut gallery was the area of cheap seats in the theater; the patrons seated there tended to be rowdy, throwing food and unrelated insults at performers on the stage.

Red herring: an object or information that is misleading or intended to distract and deceive. Comes from the fish's strong, distinct smell. Idiom's origin unconfirmed, but may come from the hunting practice of using a red herring to create a fake trail for hounds and horses to follow in training exercises.

Couch potato: a lazy person. First recorded by the *LA Times* in 1979, punning on the term "boob-tuber": someone who sits around watching TV and eating junk food all day ("boob" meaning a fool, and "tube" serving as a common nickname from the 1950s for a television set). A tuber is also the edible part of root plants like potatoes.

Gravy train: something that provides financial income without a lot of effort. Origin unconfirmed; believed to come from the United States in the early 1900s, referring to a train run that went smoothly, paid well, and required little effort from the crew.

Pie in the sky: an unrealistic promise of future happiness, something that is not likely to be fulfilled. Originated in the United States in 1911. First recorded by a laborer named Joe Hill when he wrote a parody of the Salvation Army's hymn, criticizing them for focusing on saving souls rather than feeding hungry people. The idea that "there'll be pie in the sky when you die" was Hill's way of accusing the Salvation Army of making illusory promises to the people seeking help from them.

You get more flies with honey than vinegar: politeness and kindness are more effective than hostility. Originated in Italy. First recorded in 1666 in Giovanni Torriano's *A Common Place of Italian Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*.

Hard nut to crack: a difficult problem to solve; a hard person to deal with. References the nut-cracking process, and how hard it is to break the stiff shells of walnuts, pecans, and Brazil nuts. First recorded in 1570 by Sir Thomas North in *The Morall Philosophie of Doni* (*The Fables of Bidpai*).

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Foreign Language Food Idioms

Most cultures have clever food sayings. The varied influences on culinary traditions and linguistics make for some idioms that are similar to English idioms and some that are entirely their own. Here are just a few to whet your appetite!

To be bread eaten (Spanish, *Ser pan comido*, as easy as eating bread): originated sometime after the Spanish Civil War when bread was one of the easiest and cheapest foods to prepare or find. (Compare to English idiom "easy as pie.")

To cut cod (Spanish, *Cortar el bacalao*, to be a person who is in command or who has power or authority): this idiom does not have an English counterpart. Comes from the historical practice of serving food to slaves. Colonial Spanish slaves were given salted cod to eat, but their masters would cut the cod, determining who got what portion size.

With doctors, as with miso, older is better (Japanese, 医者と味噌は古い程よい, the older the better): miso is a fermented bean paste that continues to taste better as it ages. Older doctors have more experience, so they are better at diagnosis and treatment.

Eating rice cakes while lying down (Korean, 누워서 떡먹기, something that is very easy): Korean proverb. Generally, rice cakes are a very easy food to pick up and eat. Equivalent to the English idiom "a piece of cake."

That's sausage for me (German, *Mir ist es Wurscht*, to not care about something): from the practice of butchers in the past not knowing what to do with the leftover products of a slaughtered animal and indifferently combining them into sausages—a delectable staple of the grocery's deli section today.

That is not the yolk of the egg (German, *Das ist nicht das Gelbe vom Ei*, reference to something that is not the best): traditionally, the yolk is thought to be the best part of an egg. The egg white is considered bland and unappetizing, while the yolk is flavorful.

Go cook yourself an egg (French, *Aller se faire cuire un oeuf*, leave me alone): eggs are one of the most versatile foods, so maybe that is why it is the most versatile noun for food idioms. In traditional homemaking roles, women would often preside in the kitchen and were the primary skilled cooks in their families. If a French woman's husband criticized her cooking, she would snarkily use this phrase to remind him of his culinary incompetence and to get him to leave her alone.

To have an artichoke heart (French, *Avoir un cœur d'artichaut*, to fall in love easily): artichokes have layers of

rough leaves surrounding the artichoke heart, but the leaves come off very easily. A nineteenth-century French proverb also uses the idiom's imagery: *cœur d'artichaut, une feuille pour tout le monde* (literally, "artichoke heart, a leaf for everybody").

Idioms Spice Up Conversations

Idioms add spice to our language (quite literally in the case of food idioms), but they do more than that: they root our communication in our culinary and cultural heritage. And, if we dig beneath our colloquial understanding of an idiom, its history and origin often provide further insights.

Next time you run across an unfamiliar idiom or reflect on one already incorporated in your vocabulary, feel free to do a little digging yourself—you can find great etymological and historical information in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and on sites like grammarist.com and phrases.org.uk (all of which were used in writing this article). There are tasty things to be discovered, especially if food idioms are your cup of tea. H

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