

Nibble on the past with words

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Etymology is really a history lesson in a capsule – not the textbook history of rulers, wars and peace treaties, but rather the history of ordinary events. This is especially true of the etymology of food words, which allows us to sneak glimpses of people’s daily lives from hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years ago.

In English, the words for the basic needs of human existence originated mostly on home ground, which is to say northern Europe. Not surprisingly, the terms were very broad to begin with. Nourishment is essential, and food is nourishment. The word food derives from the Old English “foda”, of Germanic origin (“fodr”), which is also the source for fodder – livestock feed (“Futter” in German).

Cereals – edible grasses – were among the fundamental foods, because they quickly filled the belly and stilled hunger. The word cereal, based on the name of the Roman goddess of agriculture, Ceres, entered our vocabulary only in the 1800s. Centuries earlier, when Britons started farming, they referred to the seeds of grasses generically as corn, an Old English word based on the Middle High German “Korn”. Our word kernel comes from the same source; it originally meant a little seed.

In American English, where corn refers specifically to maize, the word for cereal plants is grain. In British English, grain is documented already in the 14th century, when it denoted a small, hard seed. Its source is the Latin for seed, “granum”. By the 15th century, the English word grain also signified the smallest unit of weight, equivalent to the weight of one dry grain of wheat or barley.

Interestingly, there are other early food words that were related to the sense of measure. For instance meat, originally a generic term signifying any food, as well as a single piece of food, is linked to the Old English word “mete”, to measure, as in “to mete out justice”. Meat, meaning an individual item of food, survives in our word sweetmeat.

Meal can refer to ground grain, flour (related is the German “Mehl”, flour), from an ancient root that it shares with the Latin word “molere”, to grind. Meal also denoted food in the general sense, based on the Old English word “mæl”, whose meaning involved time and measure. This last sense is still to be found in our word piecemeal, signifying piece by piece. The notion of time is linked to the sense of meal as a fixed time for eating (likewise in the German “Mahl”, meal, and “Mal”, time).

Eventually, merchants travelling abroad introduced foods unknown to western Europe. Many of our fruits – except for the apple, which in Old English (“æppel”) denoted any and all fruit – came from Asia and the Middle East. Their English names could be descriptive, or adaptations of their Arabic or Persian names. For instance, orange, recorded in English in medieval times, is based on the Persian “nārang”, but the source of peach is ultimately the Latin “persicum malum”, which translates as Persian apple.

A wholly new chapter in the etymology of food words opened in the 16th century, when explorers brought back native flora and fauna from the Americas, where no known language was spoken.