

inside-out tamales: triangles of masa topped with strands of chicken or pork and sour cream. My favorites are uchepos, tiny dessert tamales made of tender sweet corn and milk that hail from the central Mexican state of Michoacán. I've only eaten these special tamales at house parties. Another reason to befriend the Mexicans in your town.



Each of these snacks is built on a base of masa. By treating raw corn kernels in an alkaline solution, Mexican cooks simultaneously leached off the toxins while adding nutrients like niacin. That's why we ate a corn-based diet but didn't suffer from the pellagra that historically plagued the U.S. South. Speaking of masa, stay away from the dried stuff called masa harina. It produces tortillas that taste like dust. Instead, look for tortillerías that grind their own masa, often from local corn. Tortillería y Taquería Ramirez in Lexington, Kentucky, for instance, gets its corn from the Bluegrass State's famous Weisenburger Mill, resulting in hefty tortillas that taste and smell earthy and don't tear easily—as buenoas any I've eaten in California. 🍷

Tejuino : If you find this agua fresca, congrats: You have in your midst people from Colima or Jalisco, birthplace of tequila and mariachi. Tejuino starts as an atole. Cooks let the drink ferment, cut the results with piloncillo and salt, then serve it chilled with a scoop of lime ice cream. Ever tasted kombucha? It's like that, except better: funky, tangy, irresistibly sweet. Jaliscan food has become trendy among Mexican Americans in the past couple of years, so look for tejuino in fancier Mexican restaurants or forward-looking bars.



Takis : Mexicans love their antojitos. The more processed, the better. Takis are essentially the mestizo child of Fritos and Cheetos, but with more spice, tang, and bite. These should definitely be at your local mercado, neighborhood convenience store, or Piggly Wiggly. If not, do yourself a favor and demand them.



Gustavo Arellano is editor of OC Weekly in Orange County, California, and author of Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America.



DODGY ETYMOLOGIES

WHO'S HUSHING THAT PUPPY?

by Allison Burkette

AMONG THE “SWARM OF NEOLOGISMS” NOTED BY H.L. MENCKEN in his 1921 book *The American Language* are a plethora of corn-related compounds: hoe-cake, Johnny-cake, corn-dodger, roasting-ear, corn-crib, corn-cob, and pop-corn. Of these, “corn dodger” reveals the most colorful etymologies. One exposition harkens to the colonial perception that cornmeal was a hardship substitution for wheat flour. A baker of that era was thought a “dodger” if she used cornmeal instead of fancier and more expensive wheat flour. Sylva Clapin offered a

Denny Culbert

¹ Do refrain from using this label for people, as the DSL notes that 'dadge' can also be used in Scots to mean something akin to "tramp" or "slut" in English.

more literal interpretation of the origins of "dodger." In his 1902 *New Dictionary of Americanisms*, he described the manner in which cooks "toss a mass of dough rapidly from hand to hand to give it shape" or the way a corn dumpling "dodges up and down in boiling."

The back-and-forth motion of this small bread's preparation could have given rise (pun intended) to its name. But the most likely etymological possibility is that "dodger" comes from the Scots word *dadge* which means "a large piece of anything,"¹ and its diminutive form, *dodgel* "a lump of something." The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* contains an 1825 reference to "a *dodgel o' bannock*." Given that "bannock" was also a word used in the Eastern states for cornbread, and given the extent of Scottish settlement in Appalachia, this seems a less dodgy explanation of why the term "corn-dodger" was applied to a lump of bread made from cornmeal.

"Hushpuppy," a related term, appears in print in 1918. Though its origins are also unclear, one theory is more pervasive than others: The hushpuppy originated as a scrap of cornmeal dough, fried quickly and fed to dogs to silence whining or begging. The identity of the puppy-hushers varies. Folk tales range from Confederate soldiers, to runaway

slaves, to hunters, to beach-front partygoers. Another theory suggests that the "hush" part of hushpuppy developed from "hash," from the French *hache*, "to cut into small pieces for cooking." Yet another theory, from the 1977 *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, holds that the name "hushpuppy" derives from the water dog or mudpuppy, a salamander legendary for its size and ill temper. The mudpuppy would be considered desperate food; including "hush" in the name for cornmeal-and-salamander makes sense—you certainly wouldn't want your neighbors to know you ate it.

Though none of these folk etymologies are likely accurate, they make for good stories. And they are more than just tall tales: Folk etymologies encode cultural information in their explanations of our linguistic world—the fanciful accounts of corn dodger and hushpuppy show us, for example, that attitudes toward cornmeal have changed. The bread flour that colonists initially regarded as uncooperative has become a touchstone of Southern cuisine. The variety of names for cornmeal-based breads speaks to that status. In the end, the best explanation for these two terms is the one that neither story-tellers nor linguists are willing to offer: Sometimes we just don't know. 🐶

Allison Burkette is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of Mississippi. Her latest book is *Language and Material Culture*.

FEAST OR FAMINE

CORN'S ROLE IN AMERICA'S (PRE)HISTORY

by Tanya M. Peres

CHARLES FAIRBANKS and his Florida State University student archeology crew meticulously scraped dirt from their excavation units for weeks. It was 1961. They had broken ground in June at Horse shoe Bend National Battlefield Park in central Alabama to search for Nuyaka, a historic Muscogee (Creek) Indian village on the Tallapoosa River. They had cleared a wading pool-sized circular stain of dark brown, almost greasy dirt. Nearly three hundred years prior, native peoples had filled this earthen storage pit with broken bones of deer and turtles, pulverized and carbonized hickory nut shells, peach pits, broken ceramic pots, and flecks of charcoal from cooking fires. As the crew scooped the remnants of these long-forgotten meals, Fairbanks squinted, peering from the edge of the unit. A white speck caught his eye. He stepped into the pit, moving gingerly. The students paused, fixing attention on their professor.

Fairbanks pulled a trowel with a worn wooden handle from his back pocket. He knelt on the



smooth floor of the excavation unit. With a wrist flick he uncovered several cracked white eggshells. The closest student held a small glass jar, ready to pack the specimens for a trip back to the lab in Tallahassee. The rest of the crew laid down their shovels and