

By Nancy Whitaker

THE FRENCH IN FRENCH TOAST

Have you ever wondered why so many of the words we use have an unrelated word in front of it? I am speaking of words like French toast, French fries, French manicure, French windows, French cuffs, French onion soup and French bangs.

Then we have terms such as swiss steak, swiss chocolate, swiss cheese, German measles, Dutch treat, Belgian waffles, Swedish meatballs, Chinese checkers and Chinese jump rope.

I recently was told of a young exchange student from France who went into a restaurant with his host family. He ordered French toast, assuming it was French cuisine. However, when he ate it, the dish was not like anything he had tasted in France. So, is French toast even connected to France?

Now most countries serve the wonderful potato dish called "French fries." But, Why are they called "French" fries? Did they come from France?

I remember when I was a kid growing up we used to buy "French cream coffee cake." I always thought it came from France, however I found out later it was the Omar man who brought it each week.

You can also get a manicure called "French nails." Why do we call them French nails? They are a very nice looking manicure, but why are they referred to as "French?"

In the 1950s, the style of French bangs became popular. I remember trying to cut my own bangs that new “French” style and will never forget how silly I looked. The style involved cutting your bangs clear back into the sides of your hair.

Another word I am curious about is “German” measles. Are they actually from Germany? Was the first case reported in Germany?

Now I love swiss steak, but could never understand why it is called “Swiss” steak. Did the steak originate in Switzerland? Do I need to dress like I’m from Switzerland when I’m preparing this dish? Must I learn to speak a new language in order to serve Swiss steak?

The same is true for Swedish meatballs and Harvard beets. Why are meatballs Swedish and beets Harvard when Harvard is not even involved?

I went on a quest to find out a few answers and you may be surprised to know where some of these terms came from.

First of all, French toast actually came about in medieval times. People found out that by dipping their old stale bread into eggs and cooking it, they could make use of the stale bread and it would go further. Nobody knows who it was that discovered this, but somehow the French got their name attached to it. Mystery is solved.

Now what about swiss steak? Would you believe that Swiss steak does not even come from Switzerland? This is a huge relief because I am not a good student of foreign language or foreign cooking.

Swiss Steak is called Swiss steak because the meat has undergone a process called “swissing” in order to make it tender.

Therefore swissing is basically tenderizing your own meat. Some people have a meat hammer

and tenderize it or you can buy it already swissed in the form of cube steak. Mystery solved.

It seems that the origin of Harvard beets is still unknown. There are theories that the dish was created three centuries ago at an English tavern called Harwood's.

Presumably, one of the tavern's customers, a Russian immigrant, opened a restaurant in 1846 in Boston. He too named his restaurant Harwood's. But since he kept pronouncing his restaurant's name Harvard, the beet dish he brought here from England became known as "Harvard beets." Another mystery solved?

Now if you know anything about German measles, French bangs, Chinese checkers, or French fries, let me know and I'll give you a Penny for Your thoughts.