

# Why We Should Examine Our Culinary Vocabulary

On the importance of using conscious language.

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**F**our years ago, Little People of America sent a petition to the Agricultural Marketing Services, an agency within the United States Department of Agriculture entrusted with, among other things, the government’s fruit and vegetable standards. “We are trying to raise awareness around and eliminate use of the word midget,” the petition said. “Though use of the word midget by the USDA when classifying certain food products is benign, Little People of America, and the dwarfism community, hopes that the USDA would consider phasing out the term midget.”

The USDA’s use of the word “midget” was indeed benign: it had, at the time, used the word as part of its size classification for foodstuffs like raisins and pecans. Nonetheless, the AMS took the petition seriously as part of its efforts to “to modernize language and remove duplicative terminology.” Last year, the agency officially agreed to remove references to “midget” in its raisin standards and to use the word “small” instead, and is in the process of doing the same for the pecan standards. The agency based its decision on the fact that the term “midget” was not widely used in the industry and “because it is redundant as there is also the term ‘small’ for the size category.” Further, the AMS said, it supported the change “as a matter of common decency.”

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**L**anguage can be a tricky thing. It devolves and evolves, and terminology can embed our prejudices, at least until our thinking and usage around those terms change. That’s certainly true of the names of certain foods: what we now call Brazil nuts were once called nigger toes. Some licorice candies, too, were formerly known by names that invoked the n-word. Pillsbury once had a line of Funny Faces powdered drinks, which included the flavors “Injun Orange” and “Chinese Cherry.” Those flavors were eventually renamed Jolly Olly Orange and Choo Choo Cherry.

Yet in the march of progress, we don’t make the same strides at the same time. We use language offensive to some, but not to others; slurs enter our everyday lexicon. And because we often are out of step with one another, calls to change offensive language—often made by those targeted by the slurs—are sometimes answered with ferocious resistance. When the Agricultural Marketing Services solicited comments about its proposed rule to remove “midget” from its standards, for example, a few members of the public were incredulous.

“This is akin to killing fleas with a cannon,” one wrote. “Certainly, there is a better use for workers at the USDA than to be checking under every rock for an offended person.”

“It’s a shame political correctness has come to censoring the federal government!” wrote in another. “The ‘little people’s’ beef may not be with the word or the government’s use of the word but with the self-image they have allowed others to create for them.”

Similarly, when a bakery in Southern California learned that Native Americans consider the word “squaw” offensive and dehumanizing, it looked to rename its squaw bread and asked customers for suggestions. [Some saw this as an unnecessary act of political correctness and an uproar ensued.](http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Squaw-Bread-Controversy-Causes-Harsh-Critique-for-Restaurant-Owner-316054501.html) (<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Squaw-Bread-Controversy-Causes-Harsh-Critique-for-Restaurant-Owner-316054501.html>)

Despite many conversations about whether “[Irish Car Bomb](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/mar/17/irish-car-bomb-st-patricks-day-bars)” is an appropriate name for a cocktail with whiskey, Guinness, and Baileys Irish Cream, it’s still a popular drink, particularly on Saint Patrick’s Day. In Britain, “[chinky](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/nigel-farage/11303133/Nigel-Farage-defends-use-of-word-chinky.html)” (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/nigel-farage/11303133/Nigel-Farage-defends-use-of-word-chinky.html>) is (still) slang for Chinese takeout. And while [some see problems with the word “thug”](https://afroculinaria.com/2014/10/22/thug-kitchen-its-not-just-about-aping-and-appropriation-its-about-privilege/) (<https://afroculinaria.com/2014/10/22/thug-kitchen-its-not-just-about-aping-and-appropriation-its-about-privilege/>) in the name of the popular website and cookbook *Thug Kitchen*, others—including [Thug Kitchen’s founders](http://www.tastebook.com/blog/thug-kitchen-a-million-f-bombs-and-books-later/) (<http://www.tastebook.com/blog/thug-kitchen-a-million-f-bombs-and-books-later/>) and

[their cookbook publisher](http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/64404-four-questions-for-thug-kitchen-publisher-mary-ann-naples.html) (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/people/article/64404-four-questions-for-thug-kitchen-publisher-mary-ann-naples.html>) —do not.

In South Africa, the word “kaffir” is a viciously derogatory term, generally considered the equivalent of the n-word in the United States; a law has been proposed that would make [merely saying the word a crime in South Africa](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/world/africa/south-africa-hate-speech.html?_r=0) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/world/africa/south-africa-hate-speech.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/28/world/africa/south-africa-hate-speech.html?_r=0)). Yet that word is often used to describe the small, bumpy limes found in Southeast Asian cooking. Over the last few decades, there have been various campaigns aimed to discourage use of the word: in 1997, [food writer Jessica Harris suggested eliminating the word from recipes](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-23/food/fo-51370_1_lime-leaf) ([http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-23/food/fo-51370\\_1\\_lime-leaf](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-04-23/food/fo-51370_1_lime-leaf)) and substituting it instead with, perhaps, “Thai lime leaf.” In 2004, [David Karp in the New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/14/dining/latest-green-fashions-come-in-many-styles.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/14/dining/latest-green-fashions-come-in-many-styles.html>) noted that the word, as used to describe the lime, may have developed independently from the epithet. But because of its association with the slur, Karp noted, “the Thai name, makrut, is sometimes used as a substitute.” *The Oxford Companion to Food*, too, [suggests](https://books.google.com/books?id=RL6LAWAAQBAJ&pg=PA437&lpg=PA437&dq=kaffir+lime+oxford+companion+to+food&source=bl&ots=AI5FhYgALU&sig=2DW98AA8L_8cdBWE-FuJdXvEpV4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiXrO7Y9qvQAhWMKyYKHyeYAhAQ6AEIPzAG#v=onepage&q=kaffir%20lime%20oxford%20companion%20to%20food&f=false) ([https://books.google.com/books?id=RL6LAWAAQBAJ&pg=PA437&lpg=PA437&dq=kaffir+lime+oxford+companion+to+food&source=bl&ots=AI5FhYgALU&sig=2DW98AA8L\\_8cdBWE-FuJdXvEpV4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiXrO7Y9qvQAhWMKyYKHyeYAhAQ6AEIPzAG#v=onepage&q=kaffir%20lime%20oxford%20companion%20to%20food&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=RL6LAWAAQBAJ&pg=PA437&lpg=PA437&dq=kaffir+lime+oxford+companion+to+food&source=bl&ots=AI5FhYgALU&sig=2DW98AA8L_8cdBWE-FuJdXvEpV4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiXrO7Y9qvQAhWMKyYKHyeYAhAQ6AEIPzAG#v=onepage&q=kaffir%20lime%20oxford%20companion%20to%20food&f=false)) makrut “now seems better to use.” And in 2014, [Veronica Vinje, then a graduate student in British Columbia, launched @kaffirnomore](http://modernfarmer.com/2014/07/getting-rid-k-word/) (<http://modernfarmer.com/2014/07/getting-rid-k-word/>) to discourage kaffir in favor of makrut. There was support for the name change, but there was, perhaps inevitably, also backlash: when [Savory Spice Shop posted](http://www.savoryspiceshop.com/blog/gather-round-the-table/what-are-makrut-lime-leaves-68.html) (<http://www.savoryspiceshop.com/blog/gather-round-the-table/what-are-makrut-lime-leaves-68.html>) about the company’s decision to use makrut rather than kaffir, a commenter lamented, “It is truly [sic] a sad state of affairs that you have to worry about being politically correct about the name of lime leaves.”

Now, in 2016, many grocers, restaurants, and publications have adopted “makrut lime” as a matter of course, but the adoption by no means has been universal. In recipes, in food magazines, on menus, the k-word persists.

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“**I** really believe that the words I *think* influence the words I use, and the words I use influence my behavior,” says Karen Yin. “It’s a daily or hourly practice to use words that you believe in.” Yin is the founder of [Conscious Style Guide](http://consciousstyleguide.com/) (<http://consciousstyleguide.com/>), a compendium of resources for those interested in learning about, or using, respectful, inclusive language. It’s a handy spot, a place that doesn’t

necessarily dictate the words you use, or shouldn't use, but rather gives you the tools for thinking about your choice of language. Assuming, of course, you're motivated enough to look this stuff up in the first place.

"Often the question for using compassionate language is, *What's in it for me? What do I get out of this?* Well, what you get out of it depends on who you are," Yin says. "If you're a writer, are you answering to your readers? Are your readers going to look at your publication and say, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe they just used this word that is known to be universally offensive?'"

Yin, to be clear, isn't in favor of banning words outright (after all, she does understand some of the resistance to changes in vocabulary: "I get it," she says. "I don't like being told what to do, either"). She would instead prefer that we think critically about language and its effects.

"I think it's important to know the conversations out there about different words," she says, "and the theories about why they're offensive and how they might impact you as a person or your business or your readership. And if you choose to use a word that's likely to be offensive, you do it by choice. And I hope you have a good reason for doing it."

As to whether this entire discussion is what some might dismiss as being overly "politically correct," Yin strikes a pragmatic tone.

"I don't know what 'politically correct' means," she says. "Politically correct according to whose politics? I think if you have two options and one option has the potential to hurt people, to limit people, to stereotype people, and the other option does not do that, I don't see anything wrong with choosing the option that does less harm."

"With my website, and as an editor and a writer, I'm not in the business of changing minds," Yin says. "I would rather focus our collective energy into building a world that is more inclusive for the rest of us."

Indeed, you can imagine it wouldn't be terribly difficult to build and sustain a food world that is more conscious about inclusive language. It would have to start, though, with our intention to consider our word choices. The power of knowledge, after all, is its ability to disempower ignorance. If you initially didn't know how midget, squaw, Irish Car Bombs, chinky, thug, and kaffir offend, surely you do now. And now, whether you—as a writer, as a publication, as a chef, as a restaurant, as an individual, as a matter of common decency begin your practice of using language you believe in, that step is for you to take.