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Getting a taste for hoagies and mutton-busting



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

IT TAKES a trip to another part of the English-speaking world to be reminded of how much the vocabularies within national varieties of English differ.

In the United States recently, I noticed distinctive food terms specific to regional and rural parts of the land that we don't encounter on a quick trip to New York.

Pierogies are an example. These boiled dumplings made from unleavened dough are common in northern and midwestern states with big Slavic-derived populations, but are particularly popular in rural Pennsylvania.

The hoagie, a type of submarine sandwich made from a long stick of French or Italian bread, also has its origins in Pennsylvania. Hoagies traditionally have fillings that include meat and cheese, but a common modern variant is tuna.

Funnel cakes – sweet, flat, deep-fried batter cakes, served with jam and sugar – are found in parts of Pennsylvania with a history of Dutch settlement. In the midwest, Coney Islands are frankfurter hot dogs flavoured with raw onions, mustard, tomato sauce, and relish.

These are unknown in Coney Island, Brooklyn, or downtown New York, where the traditional flavouring in a hot dog is mustard. Interestingly, the origins of these terms are not often known to the locals.

Staying in the Ricketts Glen State Park in Pennsylvania, we dined at a local hotel where it was somewhat disconcerting to find Chicken a la Ricketts on the menu.

And in Pennsylvania's Sullivan County, a favourite event at Founders' Day celebrations is out-house racing. This involves the

construction and decoration of outhouses by teams with alarming names such as Pepe-la-Poop and Super Septic Suckers. A far cry from the sophistication of New York.

Further away, in South Dakota, mutton busting, in which children bronc-ride sheep, is a rodeo event that few New Yorkers will have witnessed. What we don't find in rural parts, however, are bark parks. Sometimes council-sponsored, and sometimes developed by private citizens, bark parks are extensive areas in which dogs and their owners can exercise freely. They might include fenced-in areas, challenging obstacles and dog-friendly water fountains within their boundaries.

In Berkeley, one can find signs outside both commercial and residential buildings which read "No Solicitors". It was a surprise to see flowering pohutukawa, cabbage trees, a full range of our indigenous pittosporum trees, including tarata, or lemonwoods, and our ake ake grown as street trees there.

It seems we exported our plants, but not their names, for no local could identify them by name or by country of origin. Quite noticeably, US towns and cities have a regulation Elm, Walnut, and Chestnut street. The botanic equivalents, perhaps, of our Karaka, Miro, and Totara streets?

A usage for which no accurate denotation could be found was "commons", in the plural form, which is the name written on some, usually multi-storeyed, buildings. No light was cast on the name by locals. These buildings do not appear to contain restaurants and have no open or recreational areas,

as we might expect when thinking of other usage of the term.

Closer to more populated areas, especially in the eastern US, we find turnpikes, the name used for major highways that often, but not necessarily, collect tolls. The term comes from Middle English, where it was used for the spiked barrier at which tolls were collected and where horses were prevented from entering a pedestrian route.

Is there something incongruous in the use of this medieval term for an eight-laned motorway, the surface of which is known as a pavement?

Closer still to Wall Street, we become conscious of newly-coined acronyms, such as Tarp (Troubled Asset Relief Program) in which major banks are lent government funds to stabilise lending. In a report in the paper *USA Today*, the term unsnobby was used to describe McDonald's coffee. A Google search, back home, shows five instances of the term's use in New Zealand websites – three of them concerned with coffee.

Regional lexical differences are less common here, but where we find them, we need to capture, honour, and record them, if only to enlighten word-obsessed visitors. They provide us with valuable glimpses into diverse cultures and their concerns.

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