

Chipping Away at British and American English

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It has been said that Great Britain and the United States are two nations divided by a common language. When it comes to potatoes, this is most evident in three words: chips, fries, and crisps. Basically, British crisps are US chips, while British chips are US fries/French fries. Confused? Let's look a little closer.

***Orange* chips anyone?**

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “chip” is first recorded in the context of food in around 1440, when it meant “a paring of bread-crust.” This sense became obsolete in the sixteenth century. We next see an OED food reference in 1769:

Put salt in the water for either oranges preserved, or any kind of orange chips.

These “chips” were slices or chunks of fruits or vegetables, such as apples, potatoes, and peaches, and were cut in various sizes and shapes. Fruit chips were typically dried or otherwise preserved, while potato chips were fried. Britain retained this usage, especially when referring to fish and chips. A newly arrived Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe, Joseph Malin, is credited with opening the first fish and chip shop in the East End of London in the 1860s.

The United States developed its own vocabulary for variations on fried potatoes. Americans had a penchant for thin chips, and recipes for slender, crisp-fried potato slices first appeared in 1824. By the mid-nineteenth century, fried potato slices were called potato chips or Saratoga chips, named for Saratoga Springs, a popular resort city in upstate New York, where they were popularized. In the late nineteenth century, when deep-fried julienne potatoes (potatoes cut into thin strips) became popular in England, they were still called “chips,” “chip-potatoes” or “fried chip-potatoes.” To avoid confusion with the already popular potato chip, Americans used a variety of terms for these potato sticks—German fried potatoes, German fries, French fried potatoes, and French fries.

A political hot potato...

When the United States entered World War I, the word “German” was expunged from many American phrases, and French fries became the favored term for thin potato sticks. Similarly and more recently, when the French refused to support the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, US Representative Robert W. Ney, the Chair of the House Administration Committee, ordered all references to “French fries” be expunged from the menus of the restaurants and snack bars run by the House of Representatives. French fries were duly renamed “Freedom Fries.” However, unlike “French fries,” the term “Freedom Fries” has never really caught on.

The global chip?

When American-style potato chips were introduced in Great Britain in the 1920s, to avoid confusion with the established term “chip potatoes” they were called potato crisps or simply crisps. Over time, though, these clearly drawn distinctions became blurred. For instance, British-style batter-fried fillets and fried potatoes have become popular in the United States and Canada, and even on the western side of the Atlantic they’re called “fish and chips.” Similarly, when thin French fries—along with hamburgers and other American fast foods—went global, the word “fries” became the standard term in many English-speaking countries (at least in fast-food outlets). Likewise, as American snack foods were marketed overseas, the term potato chips was adopted throughout the world, even in the United Kingdom—although most people there do still call them “crisps.”

The creators of novel potato-based snacks have introduced some new coinages to the world of chips and crisps. In 1967, General Mills introduced Chipos, said to be tastier, crisper, lighter, and less oily because they were fried much faster than traditional potato chips. Two years later Procter & Gamble introduced Pringles, made from dehydrated and reconstituted potatoes. Pringles are uniform in size and shape, so they can be stacked and packaged in a tube. Chipos didn’t make the cut as a commercial product. Pringles were a tremendous success and are sold all over the world, but apparently the time has not arrived for them to be enshrined in an Oxford dictionary.

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3 May 2011

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This article originally appeared on www.oxforddictionaries.com