

DINER LINGO a history

THE EATING HOUSES From the *New York Herald*, August 10, 1845, column 5

The Eating Houses – One great source of convenience and accommodation to strangers visiting New York, are eating houses, which are now scattered about the city. At any time of the day a meal, chosen from a great variety, can be obtained without delay, and a little expense. These houses are usually well furnished with marble tables, polite and attentive waiters, who are flying about in all directions giving orders, which to the uninitiated, sound more unintelligible than Greek or Dutch.

For instance, the waiter calls out to the cutter and carver for “plum, wine,” – while another cries out at the top of his voice for “dumplings on a large – suet without” – or “rice, hard” – mingled with the phrases “veal cul’et” – “clam pie” and “roast beef” cutting and crossing each other, so that the visitor is lost in wonder, that the person receiving the orders does not go mad, and abdicate.

DINER SLANG

Diner slang has been around a long time. In 1852, a newspaper in Detroit printed some examples, and by the 1870s, black waiters made it popular. After World War II, soda jerks – another term that later crossed over into popular use – and drive-in waitresses added more terms.

A HISTORY OF THE DINER

The term lunch counter was first recorded in 1869 in the United States, and became known as a luncheonette in the 1930s. Many terms were launched from local and ethnic roots that might be considered politically incorrect these days, and others are linked to their digestive reaction. Some waiter/cook shorthand has become a standard part of our language, such as mayo, BLT, and stack (of pancakes).

DECIPHERING THE LINGO

You might want to learn a little diner lingo in case you have the occasion to check out one of the old mom and pop hash houses or newer retro diners, so you can have a little fun with your waiter/waitress. Some of these definitions are sure to bring a smile, if not to stir memories. Mick Cunningham on the brilliant language of American diners...

“We love of American diners and there are 4,205,986 ways of describing eggs and toast. Some of their rich waiter/cook lingo has even drifted into mainstream English, such as mayo and BLT. But a lot of it hasn’t. You can still come across some of this older lingo in various Luncheonette and Soda Shoppes in smaller towns across the US., and an occasional new retro diner.”

THE INFLUENCE OF EATERY LINGO ON DINING OUT

By John Clarke - April 2003

Chances are you begin the day with a “mug of murk”, some “elephant dandruff,” or even “two dots and a dash,” in other words: a cup of coffee, a bowl of corn flakes, and two fried eggs with a strip of bacon. Although mostly unfamiliar today, the serving of classic American breakfast lingo is still impressive for its inventive spirit.

The “quick bite” meal and the eatery slang, which followed it, were created in response to a growing need to get the food to the customer, fast. It has been with us since the 1840s, and by the turn of the century, ice cream sodas and hot dogs charmed their way into our hearts, in cleverly coded catchwords, were already hard at work.

You sat at the counter and eyeballed the menu. An age-old question greeted you from the other side, “So, what’ll be?” You placed your order and heard a shout, “Wax a high hat on a cable car, go heavy on the barn paint and carnations!” Just like that, this “Call” got you an open-faced cheeseburger, smothered in ketchup and onions – pronto.

For these “slingers,” short order short-hand was a valuable showpiece. During the 1930s talented jargon jockeys got work wherever they went because they brought in steady customers and kept everything in a “grab joint” moving. Shorter slang was good for business.

Today, when you order your eggs “over easy” or ask for a “burger with the works” in a diner, you’re using enduring examples of this smart and sassy jargon that was routinely dished out all over across the country.

Unfortunately, the heyday of slang over-the-counter has slipped away. But this witty, irreverent jargon deserves to be relished once again.



DINER LINGO GLOSSARY*

Abbott And Costello: Franks and beans.

AC: American cheese sandwich.

Arches: Eggs.

Acid: Vinegar.

Adam and Eve on a log: Two poached eggs on toast.

Adam and Eve on a raft: Two poached eggs on toast.

Adam and Eve on a raft, and wreck 'em: Eggs on toast, scrambled.

Adams ale: Plain water.

Adams ale, hold the hail: Water, no ice.

Ade: A drink made of fruit juice and sweetened water.

Aggies: Baked beans.

Alive: Raw (said of oysters).

Alleviator: Glass of tomato juice and a couple black coffee.

All arms and legs: Weak (said of coffee or soup).

All black: Chocolate soda with chocolate ice cream.

All hot: Baked potato.

All the Way: a sandwich made with lettuce, mayonnaise, onion and butter.

All the way: A chocolate cake with chocolate ice cream.

Alps: Restaurant above ground.

Angel food cake and wine: Bread and water.

Angels on horseback: Oysters rolled in bacon and served on toast.

Ant paste: Chocolate pudding.

A Pie: Apple pie.

Arizona: Buttermilk. (See: American Speech, April 1946 by Robert Shafer in *The Language of West Coast Culinary Workers* "...because a waitress thinks any man drinking buttermilk ought to be in Arizona for his health.")

A splash of red noise: Tomato soup.

Athlete's foot: Stewed dried peaches.

Atlanta Special: Coca-Cola.

Axle grease or Skid grease: Butter.

Baby: Milk.

Baby Juice: Milk.

Baby juice, moo juice, Sweet Alice or cow juice: Milk.

Back teeth afloat: Intoxicated.

Baled hay: Shredded wheat.

Ball of fire: Whiskey.

Ball of fire: A glass of brandy.

Balloon juice: Soda water.

Banner: A restaurant track.

Battery acid: Grapefruit juice.

B and B: Bread and butter.

Baby sauce: Mustard.

Bad breath: Onions.

Baked Alaska: Baked Swiss steak.

Bald headed row: Restaurants booths.

Bang berries: Baked beans.

Bank: Cash register.

Barked pie: Fruit cobbler.

Barks: Frankfurters.

Barley broth: Beer.

Barley water: Beer.

Bar mop: Beer.

Barn stormer: Itinerant restaurant worker.

Base runner: Itinerant restaurant worker.

Beadsteader: Sleepy counterman.

Bean buster: Heavy eater.

Beef a la mode: Beef stew.

Beef-on-wreck: A Buffalo, New York, specialty, made of thin slices of roast beef topped with its own juices and served on hard, caraway-seeded roll usually eaten with horseradish.

Beef stick: Bone.

Bees: American cheese.

Beetle: Policeman.

Beetle blood: Ale.

Beggars: Five-cent and ten-cent checks.

Belch water: Alka Seltzer, Seltzer or soda water.

Belly busters: Baked beans.

Belly cheat: Apron.

Belly chokers: Doughnuts.

Belly furniture: Good food.

Belly warmer: Cup of coffee.

Bender: An employee having food concealed on his person when leaving work.

Bending an elbow: Drinking beer at a bar.

Bend the crab: Overcharge a disagreeable person.

Bernice: Aspirin tablets.

Berries: Eggs.

Bessie: Roast beef.

Better half: Wife.

Bibb: Napkin.

Bible: Cook book.

Biddies on a raft: Poached eggs on toast.

Biddy: French toast.

Bing: Small restaurant.

Bird seed: A bowl of cereal.

Biscuit: The heart.

Biscuit grabber: Glutton.

Birdseed: Breakfast cereal.

Black and white: Chocolate, sarsaparilla, or root beer soda with vanilla ice cream (soda fountain).

Black and white: Cup of black coffee with cream on the side.

Black and white: Root beer.

Black and white: Chocolate milk.

Black ball: Discharge from job.

Black ball: Chocolate ice cream.

Black bottom: Chocolate ice cream with chocolate syrup.

Black bottom: A pie made with a chocolate custard topped with rum custard and whipped cream.

Black box: Safe (money).

Black cow: Chocolate milkshake.

Black moo: Chocolate milk.

Black stick: Chocolate ice cream cone.

DINER LINGO GLOSSARY*

- Black water:** Root beer.
- Bleed:** To empty; to overcharge.
- Blond:** Coffee with cream.
- Blond with Sand:** Coffee with cream and sugar.
- Bloodhounds:** Frankfurters.
- Blowout patches:** Pancakes.
- BLT:** Bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich.
- Blue-bottle:** Bromo Seltzer, a trademark for a digestive aid of bicarbonated soda that comes in a blue bottle.
- Blue Plate Special:** A dish of meat, potato, and vegetable served on a plate (usually blue) section in three parts.
- Bossy in a bowl:** Beef stew, so called because “Bossy” was a common name for a cow.
- Bossy on a board:** Roast Beef Sandwich.
- Bottom:** Ice cream added to a drink.
- Bowl of red:** A bowl of chili con carne, so-called for its deep red color.
- Bowl on fire:** Chili.
- Bow-wow:** A hot dog.
- Breakfast cream:** Light cream in New Orleans.
- Breath:** An onion.
- Break it and shake it:** Add a raw egg to drink, especially a milkshake.
- Bridge:** Four of anything so called from the card-game hand of bridge.
- Bridge party:** Four of anything so called from the card game hand of bridge.
- Bronx Vanilla:** Garlic.
- Brown bellies:** Baked beans.
- Bucket of cold mud:** A bowl of chocolate ice cream.
- Bucket of hail:** A small glass of ice.
- Bullets:** Also called “whistle berries” or “Saturday nights” Baked beans, so called because of the supposed flatulence they cause.
- Bun pup:** A hot dog.
- Burn it and let it swim:** Float, made with chocolate syrup and ice cream floated on top.
- Burn one:** Put a hamburger on the grill.
- Burn one, take it to the garden and pin a rose on it:** Hamburger with lettuce, tomato and onion.
- Burn the British:** Toasted English muffin.
- Burn the British, and draw one in the dark:** English muffin, toasted, with black coffee.
- Butcher's revenge:** Meatloaf.
- Cabinet:** A Rhode Island name for soda fountain confection of milk, syrup, and ice cream blended in a mixer.
- Cracklefruit:** Eggs.
- Canary Island special:** Vanilla soda with chocolate ice cream.
- Carefree:** A workers tip or percentage of the check as gratuity i.e. money to provide transportation home.
- Cat's eyes or fish eyes:** Tapioca pudding.
- CB:** A cheeseburger.
- Chewed fine:** Hamburger.
- Chicago:** Pineapple.
- Chicago-style dog:** Steamed poppy bun with several relishes.
- Chicago sundae:** Sundae with pineapples.
- Chicken in the hay:** Egg salad sandwich.
- Chicks on a raft:** Eggs on toast.
- China:** Rice pudding.
- Choker hole:** A doughnut.
- Chopper:** A table knife.
- City juice:** Water.
- C.J.:** A cream cheese and jelly sandwich.
- C. J. White:** Cream cheese and jelly sandwich on white bread.
- Clean up the kitchen:** Hash or hamburger.
- Cluck:** Eggs.
- Cluck and grunt:** Eggs and bacon.
- Cockleberries:** Eggs.
- Coffee milk:** A blend of little coffee and a glass of sweetened milk.
- C.O. highball:** Castor oil.
- Coke pie:** Coconut pie.
- Cold mud:** Chocolate ice cream.
- Cold spot:** A glass of iced tea.
- Coney Island chicken or Coney Island:** Hot dog, so called because hot dogs were popularly associated with the Coney Island stands in which they were sold.
- Coney Island:** A hot dog, so called because hot dogs are properly associated with the Coney Island stands in which they were sold.
- Corndog:** Fried hot dog with a cornmeal batter.
- Corrugated roof:** Lemon meringue pie.
- Cowboy:** A Western omelette or sandwich.
- Cowboy with spurs:** A Western omelette with fries
- Cow feed:** A salad.
- Cow juice:** Milk.
- Cow paste:** Butter.
- Cow to cover:** Butter.
- Crackleberries:** Eggs.
- Creep:** Draft beer.
- Cremate:** Burn something.
- Cremate a blue, bikini cut:** A well-done, toasted blueberry muffin cut into four pieces.
- Crowd:** Three of anything, (possibly from the old saying, “two’s company, three’s a crowd”).
- Cup of mud:** Coffee.
- Customer will take a chance/clean up the kitchen/sweep the floor:** Hash.
- Deadeye:** Poached egg.
- Devils on horseback:** Prunes rolled in bacon served on toast.
- Deluxe:** Cheese, lettuce and mayonnaise.
- Dine and dash:** Eat without paying the bill.
- Dog and maggot:** Cracker and cheese.
- Dog biscuit:** Cracker.
- Dog's body:** A pudding of pea soup and flower or hardtack.
- Dog soup:** Water.
- Dough well done:** Toast.
- Dough well done with cow to cover:** Buttered toast.

DINER LINGO GLOSSARY*

- Douse it:** Smothered in the sauce.
- Drag one through Georgia:** Cola with chocolate syrup.
- Draw one:** Coffee.
- Draw one in the dark:** A cup of black coffee.
- Draw one muddy:** Coffee.
- Easy over:** Eggs turned over and briefly cooked.
- Echo:** Repeat the order.
- Egg cream:** A New York City soda fountain confection made from chocolate syrup, milk, and seltzer.
- Eighty one:** A glass of water.
- Eighty-six:** To remove an item from the order or from the menu. "Do not sell to that customer" or "The kitchen is out of that item ordered." Perhaps from the practice at Chumley's Restaurant in New York City of throwing rowdy customers out the door, which is No. 86 Bedford Street. The term certainly predates its first appearance in print circa 1967.
- Eggs in the sauce:** Eggs at breakfast with chili served at O. T. Hodge Chile Parlor.
- Elephant dandruff:** A bowl of corn flakes.
- English winter:** Iced tea.
- Eternal twins:** Ham and Eggs.
- Eve:** Apple pie.
- Eve with a lid on it:** Apple pie, referring to the Biblical Eve's tempting apple and to the crust that covers it.
- Eve with a moldy lie:** Apple pie with a slice of cheese.
- Fifty-five:** A class of root beer.
- Fifty-one:** Hot chocolate.
- Filet:** Served with ice cream.
- Fire:** Cook it now.
- First lady:** An order of ribs. **Spareribs**, a pun of Eve's being made from Adam spare rib.
- Fish eyes:** Tapioca pudding.
- Fishie-wishies:** Fish fingers.
- Five:** A large glass of milk.
- Flat car:** Pork chops.
- Florida tonic:** Orange juice.
- Flop two:** Two fried eggs over easy.
- Fly cake or roach cake:** A raisin cake or huckleberry pie.
- Fly pie:** A raisin cake or huckleberry pie.
- Fog:** Mashed potatoes.
- Forty one:** Lemonade.
- Forty-two:** Two orders of eggs over.
- Forty-two over all the way:** Two orders of eggs over, (the same thing), but with fried potatoes and toast.
- Frenchman's delight:** Pea soup.
- Fries:** Chips.
- Fizzled hot dog:** A split, deep-fried hot dog in Baltimore.
- Frog sticks:** French fries.
- Fry two, let the sun shine:** Two fired eggs with unbroken yolks.
- Full house:** A grilled cheese, bacon and tomato sandwich.
- Garbo:** An uncommon term for a toasted English muffin.
- Gentlemen will take a chance:** Hash.
- George Eddy:** A customer who leaves no tip.
- Go for a walk:** An order to be packed and taken out.
- Golden moons on a silver sea:** Soup with pigeon eggs, a first course of an ordinary Chinese dinner. (Not lunch counter lingo.)
- Gravel train:** Sugar bowl.
- Graveyard stew:** Milk toast.
- GAC:** Grilled American cheese sandwich. This was also called "jack" (from the pronunciation of the "GAC"; a "Jack Benny": (after a radio comedian) was cheese and bacon.
- Groundhog:** Hotdog.
- Grunt:** Bacon.
- Hail:** Ice.
- Halitosis:** Garlic.
- Hamlette:** An omelette made with ham.
- Harlem:** A soda made with chocolate, named after the section of New York.
- Harlem midget:** A small chocolate soda.
- Harlem soda:** A soda made with chocolate, named after the section of New York City.
- Hemorrhage:** Ketchup.
- High and dry:** A plain sandwich without butter, mayonnaise, dressing, or lettuce.
- High, yellow, black and white:** Chocolate soda with vanilla ice cream.
- Hoboken special:** Pineapple soda with a scoop of chocolate ice cream.
- Hockey puck:** A hamburger, well done.
- Hold the Hail:** No ice.
- Hops:** Malted milk powder.
- Hot cha:** Hot chocolate.
- Hot spot:** Tea.
- Hounds on an island:** Franks and beans.
- Houseboat:** A banana split made with ice cream and sliced bananas.
- Hug one:** Squeeze a glass of orange juice.
- Ice the rice:** Rice pudding with ice cream.
- In a fog:** Mashed potatoes.
- In the alley:** Served as a side dish.
- In the bin:** The food is cooked.
- In the hay:** A strawberry milkshake, punning on hay as a straw.
- Irish turkey:** Corned beef and cabbage.
- Irish turkey with a wreath:** Corned beef and cabbage.
- Italian perfume:** Garlic.
- Jack:** Grilled American cheese sandwich.
- Jack Benny:** A "Jack Benny": (after radio comedian) with cheese with bacon.
- Jack Tommy:** Cheese and tomato sandwich.
- Java or Joe:** Coffee.
- Jayne Mansfield:** Tall stack of pancakes.
- Jerk:** An ice cream soda, referring to the jerking motion of a seltzer spigot.
- Joe:** Coffee.
- Kansas dog:** Hot dog served with mustard and melted cheese.
- Keep off the grass:** No lettuce.
- Kiss the pan:** Eggs over easy.
- L.A.:** Serve an item with ice cream.

DINER LINGO GLOSSARY*

- Let it float:** Ice Cream Soda.
- Let it swim:** Ice cream floated on top.
- Late walk:** An order to go.
- Let the sun shine:** Fried eggs with unbroken yolks.
- Life preservers:** Doughnuts.
- Lighthouse:** A bottle of ketchup.
- Looseners:** Prunes, so-called because of their supposed laxative.
- Lord's Supper:** Bread and water.
- Lumber:** A toothpick.
- Maiden's delight:** Cherries, so-called because "cherry" is a slang term for the maidenhead.
- Make a crackle:** Add a raw egg to a drink, especially milkshake.
- Make it moo:** Coffee with milk.
- Make it a virtue:** Add cherry syrup to a cola soda.
- Make them cry:** Onions.
- Mama:** Marmalade.
- Mayo:** Mayonnaise.
- M.D.:** Dr. Pepper.
- Mike and Ike or the Twins:** Salt and pepper shakers.
- Million on a platter:** Baked beans.
- Moo juice, cow juice:** Milk.
- Mud:** Black coffee or chocolate ice cream.
- Mud of murk:** Black coffee.
- Mud of O'murk:** Black coffee.
- Mug of murk:** A cup of black coffee.
- Murphy:** Potatoes, so-called because of their association with the Irish diet of potatoes, Murphy being a common Irish name.
- Mystery in the alley:** A side of hash.
- Natural:** A commercially produced soda called "7-Up," from a combination of 4 and 2, called a "natural" in the dice game craps.
- Nervous pudding:** Gelatin/Jell-O.
- New York system:** A Rhode Island term to describe an establishment that sells hot dogs or wienies. The hotdog is placed in a hot dog roll, not a bun and meat sauce is ladled on the top.
- Noah's boy:** A slice of ham, because Ham was Noah's second son.
- Noah's boy on bread:** A ham sandwich.
- No cow:** Without milk.
- Nuke:** Microwave.
- Nun's toast:** A dish of hard-boiled eggs with a milk and flour gravy served over toast.
- O.J.:** Orange juice.
- Oh gee:** Orange juice.
- Old Maids:** Prunes.
- One from the alps:** Swiss cheese sandwich.
- One on the city:** A glass of water.
- On the hoof:** Any kind of meat done rare.
- On wheels:** An order to be packed and taken out.
- Paint it red:** Put ketchup on an item.
- Paint a bow-wow red:** Hot dog with ketchup.
- Pair of drawers:** Two cups of coffee.
- Philadelphia eggs:** Two split muffins topped with cooked white chicken meat, poached eggs, and hollandaise sauce.
- Pig between two sheets:** Ham sandwich.
- Pigs in a blanket:** A ham (sometimes a sausage) sandwich.
- Pin a rose on it:** Add onion to an order.
- Pittsburgh:** Toast or something burning, toasted or charred, refers to the smokestacks evident in Pittsburgh, a coal-producing and steel-mill city. In meat cookery, this refers to a piece of meat charred outside while still red within.
- Pittsburgh rare:** Burnt outside, rare inside.
- PT:** Pot of tea.
- Put a hat on it:** Add ice cream.
- Put legs on it:** Make it a carry-out item.
- Put out the lights and cry:** Liver and onions.
- Quarter:** A quarter-pounder with cheese (cheeseburger).
- Quarterham:** A quarter-pounder without cheese.
- Radar range:** Microwave oven.
- Radio:** A tuna-fish-salad sandwich on toast punning "tuna down," which sounds like "turn it down," as one would a radio knob.
- Raft:** A side order of toast.
- Roach cake:** A raisin cake or huckleberry pie.
- Sand:** Sugar.
- Saturday nights:** Baked beans, so-called because of the supposed flatulence they cause.
- Seaboard:** Make it to go.
- Sea dust:** Salt.
- Shake it:** Milkshake.
- Shingle with a shimmy and a shake:** Buttered toast with jam.
- Sinkers:** Doughnuts.
- Shit on a shingle/SOS:** Mixed beef with gravy on toast. G.I. term for chipped beef.
- Shivering Liz:** Jell-O.
- Shoot it yellow:** Add lemon syrup or slice of lemon to a cola soda.
- Shoot one from the south:** Coca-Cola.
- Short stack:** An order of pancakes.
- Sinkers and suds:** Doughnuts and coffee.
- Skid grease:** Butter.
- Still alive:** Ultra-rare.
- Still moving:** Ultra-rare.
- Snowball:** Scoop of vanilla or other flavor of ice cream rolled in shredded, sweetened coconut that is chilled and served with a topping of chocolate syrup, or a bowl of shaved ice with fruit syrup.
- Soda:** Carbonated water: usually flavored and colored.
- Soda jerk:** A person who prepares sodas and other confections behind the counter at a soda fountain. The term comes from the jerking motion the hand had to make on the soda spigots then in use in order to fill the glasses.
- Soda jerker:** A person who prepares sodas and other confections behind the counter at a soda fountain. The term comes from the jerking motion the hand had to make on the soda spigots then in use in order to fill the glasses.

DINER LINGO GLOSSARY*

SOS: Minced beef with gravy on toast.

Soda water: The first carbonated waters were from natural sources and sold at the end of the eighteenth century as “soda water” at “soda fountains”.

Spike on an oval: Order of hash browns.

Splash of red noise: A bowl of tomato soup.

Spot with a twist: A cup of tea with lemon.

Squeeze it: Make it to go.

Squeeze one: A glass of orange juice.

Stack: An order of pancakes.

Stack of Vermont: An order of pancakes with maple syrup.

Stretch one: A Coke.

Stretch one: A cola soda.

Submarine: A doughnut.

Subway: Worker’s tip or percentage of the check as gratuity i.e. money to provide transportation home.

Suds: Beer.

Sunny side up: Fried eggs with unbroken yolks.

Sweep the floor: Hash.

Sweet Alice: Milk.

Tamale in: Tamale smothered in chili.

Take it to the Garden: Lettuce, tomato and onion.

Throw it in the mud: Add chocolate syrup.

Through Georgia: Add chocolate syrup.

To the left: Lemon syrup, customarily set to the left of the cola syrup pump.

To the right: Cherry syrup, customarily set to the right of the cola syrup pump.

Tube steak: Hot dog.

Tuna down: A tuna fish sandwich on toast.

Twenty one: Limeade.

Twins: Salt and pepper shakers.

Two cows, make them cry: Two hamburgers and onions.

Two dots and a dash: Two fried eggs with a strip of bacon.

Vermont: Maple syrup, because maple syrup comes primarily from Vermont.

Virtue: Cherry pie.

Warts: Olives.

Wax: American cheese.

Wax a hat on a cable car, go heavy on the barn paint and carnations: An open faced cheeseburger, smothered in ketchup and onions, pronto.

Western: Omelette.

Whiskey down: Toasted rye. Cooks usually pushed toaster buttons down.

Whiskey down and it’s walking: Rye toast to go.

Whistle berries: Baked beans, so-called because of the supposed flatulence they cause.

White cow: Vanilla milkshake.

Wreath: Cabbage.

Wreck ‘em: Scrambled eggs.

Wrecked hen with fruit: Scrambled eggs and orange juice.

Yum Yum: Sugar.

Zeppelins in a fog: Sausages in mashed potatoes.

CREDITS:

Diner Slang / Diner Lingo research & glossary by **Barbara Kuck**, Culinary Historian & Curator, Chicago Culinary Museum and Chefs Hall of Fame
Text: **Tom Roberts**, Szathmáry Distinguished Visiting Professor of Gastronomy

*It should be noted that some terms and definitions reflect a different time and set of cultural norms than those we experience today. They offer an insightful snapshot of Americana Hospitality.