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THE DARK MILLENNIAL HISTORY OF SOUSE

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*The name for souse, a still popular dish in the Caribbean and composed of pickled pig's parts, is traced via Old French to Old Low Franconian, the Germanic dialect of the invading Franks, and at a further remove to Proto-Germanic *sultjō- 'brine'. Always a humble constituent of English diet, souse was an important food-stuff for enslaved Africans in the English colonies of the Caribbean. The American port of Boston is a likely source for the pickled pork packed in casks and filled with apple cider vinegar.*

Keywords: souse, pickling, Caribbean, slavery

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines souse as 'various parts of a pig or other animal, esp. the feet and ears, prepared or preserved for food by means of pickling', and notes a first attestation in English letters from 1391. Pronounced /sowss/, the word's etymology is explained as a borrowing from French:

> < Old French sous (souz, soulz, soult, = Provençal soutz, sols), or souce, < Old High German sulza, Old Saxon sulta, or directly < the Germanic stem sult- (see salt v.1 and silt n.), whence also Italian solcio pickle, condiment.' [1]

Unusually for this historical lexicographical reference work, the origin of the term is pursued beyond the first donor language, here French, to early Germanic.

There is good reason, however, to question the relevance of Old

High German or Old Saxon in the context of such a transfer, when no routes of influence can be proposed. A more plausible source for early Old French *sous* is in the language of the invading Franks, called by historical linguists Old Low Franconian, and to be situated in formal terms between Old Dutch and Old High German. This Germanic dialect, which has left no written records, had a great influence on Gallo-Romance in many practical spheres of life, as well as coining the future name of the country, France. Like the other Germanic forms cited above, the Frankish term for pickled foods and/or the brine in which they were preserved is now traced to a Proto-Germanic **sultjō-*, tentatively defined as 'brine'.[2] While the term derived from Frankish would prove both phonologically and semantically stable over a very long period, cognate forms in related Germanic languages exhibit a range of meanings: Norwegian *sylt* 'brackish swamp', Old Dutch *sulta* 'brackish terrain', Middle and Modern Dutch *sult* and Swedish *sylt* 'head cheese', Old High German *sulza* 'brine', but, culinarily more evolved, modern German *Sülze* 'aspic'.

The Old French word entered the dialect of Normandy and is attested from the twelfth century in reference to pickled pork, especially the feet, ears, and snout, in various orthographies: *suce, soiz, sous, sus, suse, suz, suze*.[3] The term was used of both the pork and the pickling brine. Many of these early instances of Anglo-French *suse* are from utilitarian texts, often medical and culinary glossaries that explain Latin terminology, e.g., from the twelfth century. 'ex succiduis: de suz' ('from the brine'; Latin *succidaneum* 'brine' < *sucus* 'juice, sap').[4]

After the Norman conquest and from Anglo-French use, *suce* 'souse' was assumed into evolving Middle English. As illustrated in the narrative literature of the times, there is no place for the humble souse at the aristocratic dinner tables of epics and romances, and the incidence of the term is largely still confined to prosaic texts such as glossaries, and manorial and monastic account books.[5] A rather fuller presence of souse is found in a rule for nuns from about 1450:

> The celeresse must se that every lady of the covent have hyr levery of sowsse ... every lady to have three thynges; that is to sey, the cheke, the ere, and the fote is a levery; the groyne and two fete ys anodyr leveray;

soe a hoole hoggs sowsse shall serve three ladyes.[6]
(The cellaress must see that every lady of the convent gets her due portion of souse ... and every lady should have three things, that is to say, the cheek, ear, and foot make up one portion; the groin and the two feet are another portion; so a whole hog's souse should serve three ladies.)

A Middle English culinary text also specifies the qualifications of those working in the kitchen: 'Of alle maner metes ye must know & fele þe fumositees of fysch, flesche, & fowles ... Salt, sowre, and sowse, alle suche þow set a-side' (For all sorts of dishes you must recognise the characteristic smells, fish, meat, and fowl ... salted, sour, pickled, and such-like you should set to one side).[7] Centuries later and as might be expected, souse is more amply exemplified in *The English Dialect Dictionary*, more fully reflecting rural usage at the end of the nineteenth century, than does the *OED*. The definition reads 'the ears, feet, tail & of a pig when pickled' and the term is also glossed 'brawn'.[8]

Souse is found as a verb with the meaning 'to prepare or preserve (meat, fish, etc.) by steeping in some kind of pickle, esp. one made with vinegar or other tart liquor' (*OED*). Interestingly, in extended use *souse* might designate other liquified preservants such as oil or honey. Ultimately it came to mean to be drenched and, figuratively, inebriated–soused, pickled.

Souse was an important component of the diet of enslaved Africans in the English colonies of the Caribbean. The land was too valuable for raising a diversity of crops and was single-mindedly devoted – prefiguring modern agricultural monocultures – to sugar-cane. The land was even more important than the labour working it, and the enslaved were poorly fed and worked until exhaustion and death, to be replaced by fresh importation. Food, tools, and other necessities were largely also imported from abroad and the port of Boston was a key source of slave supplies including food and tools. The least valued parts of pork butchering were preserved in casks of salted cider vinegar, an arrangement in which the casks were more valuable than their contents and would have been re-used.

Through the dark period of colonialism, souse, the dish and its

name, maintained itself as as a staple in the diet of the enslaved and their descendants. In fact, in most respects, linguistic and culinary, souse has stayed true to its roots for almost a millennium. The dynamism lies elsewhere: the food of slave labourers in the cane fields has now been re-symbolised, elevated to nearly the national dish of a new country. In 2021 Barbados declared its transition from Commonwealth realm to republic within the Commonwealth. From 2023 in a feature newspaper article promoting tourism to the island is found:

> [...] lunch in Barbados on a Saturday, and that's pudding and souse. The "pudding" is a mash of sweet potato, herbs and cloves steamed in pig intestines, in the style of Scottish haggis. The souse is the historically undesirable bits of the pig left for enslaved people — tail, ear, cheeks and trotters — pickled in lime juice and chopped up with onion and spicy Scotch bonnet peppers. Combined, the two elements become what could be described as a sweet-and-salty pork ceviche that's so spicy it almost begs for cold beer.[9]

Language is dynamic and among the frequent shifts in the culinary cuisine there is often a transfer from container to contained, as when words for cauldrons generate a term such as *chowder* for their contents, or when a processing term becomes the name of its product as with *roast*. In the case of *souse*, however, extant evidence shows it used throughout its long history for both the pickling brine and the pork products preserved therein.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*: *OED Online* [OED] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), s.v. souse, n.[1], https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3650656403, accessed 17 November, 2023.
2. Guus Kroonen, ed. *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), s.v. *sultjō-. Walther von Wartburg et al. eds. *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bonn: Klopp, 1923-2002), vol 17, p. 269b, reconstructs the Frankish form as *sultja. Italian solcio 'pickle, condiment' may derive from Lombardic, another invading Germanic dialect, and from the subsequent Lombard dialect of northern Italy.
3. William Rothwell et al, eds. *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Aberystwyth: Humanities Research Council, 2001), s.v. suce.
4. See Tony Hunt. *Teaching and Learning Latin in Thirteenth-Century England*, 3 vols

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vol. 2, p. 4, item 81, for this and additional examples from glossaries.

5. Paul Schaffner et al. eds. *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001), s.v. souse.
6. William Dugdale. *Monasticon Anglicanum*, edited by Roger Dodsworth, John Stevens et al. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1817-1830), vol. 1, p. 444.
7. From 1475, John Russell. 'The Boke of Nurture', in *Early English Meals and Manners*, edited by F. J. Furnivall (London: Early English Text Society, 1868; reprint 1973), p. 360.
8. Joseph Wright (ed.). *The English Dialect Dictionary* (London and New York: H. Frowde and G. B. Putnam's Sons, 1898-1905), vol. 5, p. 635, item 6.
9. 'An Independent Barbados,' *The New York Times*, March 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/22/travel/independent-barbados.html?searchResultPosition=1, accessed 22 March, 2023.

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