

So How DO You Like Them Apples?

I was on deadline. The phone rang. Again. Drat.

Now who needs me? I thought. I tried to put on a smile before answering the phone so that my frustration wouldn't come across.

The smile broadened.

On the other end of the phone was Karl from the gondola.

"Hey, I've just picked a whole bunch of apples from Norwood, ones that were hanging on some trees that no one was tending, so I asked permission and picked a bunch of boxes. Would you like one?"

Would I like a box of apples? Do apples grow on trees?

"Yes, please!"

Karl mentioned he was curious about apple phrases, such as the origins of "how do you like them apples," "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" and "the apple of my eye."

I love etymology homework as much as I love apples. What a great call, deadline or not.

"The apple of my eye" has been in use since the 9th century. At that time, apple was metaphorical for the pupil of the eye—appropriate because the little black dot was thought to be a solid sphere. And because injury to the eye would render one blind, the idiom "apple of my eye" came to suggest "that which one holds dearest."

There may be a bit of a Biblical overtone, too. John Ciardi, in "A Browser's Dictionary" suggests that the expression may be influenced by "the apple of the Tree of Knowledge (which shone enticingly as it became the center of Adam's and Eve's attention.)"

The notion that apples will keep you healthy has been around since 1866. According to the "Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings," the Welsh were known to advise:

Eat an apple on going to bed

And you'll keep the doctor from earning his bread.

The phrase showed up in the United States by 1913. And while there's no particular medical backing for this one, apples are a good source of both soluble and insoluble fiber.

And that's a good thing. A little bit of apple trivia here:

The University of Illinois Extension notes that "Soluble fiber such as pectin actually helps to prevent cholesterol buildup in the lining of blood vessel walls, thus reducing the incident of atherosclerosis and heart disease. The insoluble fiber in apples provides bulk in the intestinal tract, holding water to cleanse and move food quickly through the digestive system."

And they highly recommend not peeling the apple before you eat it. "Almost half of the vitamin C content is just underneath the skin. Eating the skin also increases insoluble fiber content. Most of an apple's fragrance cells are also concentrated in the skin and as they ripen, the skin cells develop more aroma and flavor."

How do you like them apples?

Now this phrase, which was one of my grandmother's favorites, has been a tricky one to track down. In our family, it simply meant, well, how do you like that? And chances were you might or you might not.

But it seems the rest of the world assumes that the phrase is said when one is gloating. It's been in use since the late 1920s, and but has gained recent popularity in film with the 1997 Hollywood release "Good Will Hunting."

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Word Woman

For those who don't recall the film, Will, the leading man, is boasting to his rival, Clark, about how he has gained a certain young woman's affection.

Will: Do you like apples?

Clark: Yeah.

Will: Well, I got her number. How do you like them apples?

I found several sites on the internet that suggested that the phrase may have originated in World War I with the "toffee apple," a kind of trench mortar bomb sometimes used to destroy tanks. In which case, the phrase "how do you like them apples," was probably usually answered by the enemy in the negative.

But I do like them apples. Especially when they come fresh off the tree, tasting of fall and childhood memory.

Thanks, Karl, for delicious distraction. Now, back to the deadline.

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