

**Icing on the Cake: Food Idioms**  
**(A Multicultural Book)**  
**Language Lizard Supplemental Teaching**  
**Material**  
[www.LanguageLizard.com](http://www.LanguageLizard.com)

**WHAT IS AN IDIOM?**

An idiom is a phrase that says one thing but means something different. An idiom can be a quick way of saying something complicated. Languages throughout the world have their own idioms. There are thousands of idioms in English. Knowing some of them will help you to understand what people mean.

Below is background information about the idioms portrayed in the book, *Icing on the Cake: Food Idioms*. Additional animal idioms, their meanings, and their history, are also listed below. Finally, more resources about Food Idioms are noted at the end of this document.

**FOOD IDIOMS**

**Selling like hot cakes** - Something is selling very fast.

In America, hot cakes used to be the name for waffles or pancakes. These foods, sold at fairs and food stalls, were very popular in the 1600s. They sold out almost as fast as they were cooked.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/selling+like+hot+cakes>

**A couch potato** - A person spends hours watching TV or relaxing.

This phrase was first used in the 1970s when televisions became popular.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/couch+potato>

**Bigger fish to fry** - Doing something that is more important.

This idiom, from the 1600s, was first used by a French author called Rabelais. It was included in a novel he wrote about two giants.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/have+bigger+fish+to+fry>

**Use your noodle** - Use your brain to figure out something for yourself.

A noodle is a kind of pasta, but it is also slang which means a person's head or brains. The use of the word "noodle" may have developed in the USA from the word "noddle" which means "head" in the UK.

<http://www.punditcafe.com/language/idiom-usage-interesting-food-related-english-idioms-meanings/>

**Wake up and smell the coffee** - Pay attention to what is actually happening.

This is an American expression from the mid-1950s. It was probably created because drinking coffee after getting up in the morning is a popular American habit.

<https://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms/wake+up+and+smell+the+coffee.html>

**Spill the beans** - To confess and reveal a secret.

This American idiom started to be used around 1920. It is based on two older words used in England: "spill" meant to talk in the 1500s, and "beans" meant information in the 1200s.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/spill+the+beans>

**Cry over spilled milk** - To be upset about something that cannot be changed.

This old English idiom was included in collections of proverbs as long ago as the 1600s.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/spill+the+beans>

**Apple of my eye** - A person loves very much.

This idiom is very old, first being used in the Bible (Deuteronomy 32:10) and then becoming commonly spoken in the 1600s. It is based on the idea that the pupil, in the middle of an eye, is round in shape, like a fruit.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/the+apple+of+eye>

**Going bananas** - Acting crazy.

This American idiom from the 1960s started on college campuses. It probably developed from the idiom “going ape” which had the same meaning. Since people thought that apes liked bananas, the second idiom developed from the first one.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/go+bananas>

**Two peas in a pod** - Two people who are very similar.

This idiom has been used in American print since the early 1800s. It refers to how peas inside a peapod all appear the same size and shape.

<https://knowyourphrase.com/two-peas-in-a-pod>

**A grain of salt** - To be skeptical.

This idiom might date back to Roman times. The antidote to ingesting poison contained a grain of salt.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Pinch+of+salt>

**Pie in the sky** - A goal that is too ambitious and may never happen.

This American idiom was first used in 1911 by a songwriter called Joe Hill. In one of his songs, a preacher tells a slave: “You’ll get pie in the sky when you die (that’s a lie).”

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/pie+in+the+sky>

**The big cheese** - A person who is important and powerful.

This American idiom dates from the late 1800s. It may have developed from the Persian word *cheez* meaning “thing”. Or it might have developed from the English word “chief”. Similar idioms with the same meaning are: big shot, big wheel, and big gun.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/big+cheese>

**Icing on the cake** - Something which is an extra special treat.

Icing, also called frosting, was first used on cakes in the 1600s. White sugar was very expensive and most people couldn’t afford it very often. This meant that cake was a treat. If a person could afford extra sugar to make icing, they had an extra-special treat.

<https://www.gingersoftware.com/content/phrases/icing-on-the-cake/#.XiyFizJKiM8>

**My cup of tea** - Something which a person does not enjoy doing.

Tea is a popular drink around the world. People like or dislike different flavors. In the 1800s, people often said that an activity was their cup of tea if they enjoyed it. Since the early 1900s, people usually say an activity is *not* their cup of tea if they *don’t* enjoy it.

<https://knowyourphrase.com/not-my-cup-of-tea>

**Too many cooks** - Too many people involved in a project can create a mess.

This old idiom dates to the 1500s. It refers to a kitchen with too many cooks, all adding different ingredients to a soup, and thus spoiling its flavor.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/too+many+cooks+spoil+the+broth>

**Food for thought** - Something which requires you to think deeply.

This idiom has been used since the 1800s. A large meal needs to be chewed and digested slowly. So the idiom developed to mean that a large idea cannot be rushed through but must be thought about.

<https://grammarist.com/idiom/food-for-thought/>

**In a pickle** - To be in trouble.

Since the 1500s in Europe, vegetables have been preserved in vinegar and called pickles. The idiom dates to that time, and perhaps refers to the strange mixture of different vegetables that were added together. A similar idiom with the same meaning is “in a stew”.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/in-a-pickle.html>

**Bring home the bacon** -To work to support and take care of one’s family.

This American phrase was first used in 1906 in the sport of boxing. A boxer called Joe Gans was competing for the world lightweight championship. His mother sent him a telegram telling him to “bring home the bacon”, meaning she wanted him to win and bring the prize money home.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/bring-home-the-bacon.html>

**A lot on one's plate** - To have a lot of things to take care of.

This idiom became popular after an American author, Roger L. Simon, wrote a novel titled *The Houseboat Killing*. In it, he used the phrase: "I've got plenty on my plate." This idiom can also be phrased: My plate is full. This means that a person cannot take on any more jobs or responsibilities.

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/have+a+lot+on+one%27s+plate>

**A free lunch** - Everything in life has a price that must be paid.

In the 1800s, free food was promised to people at bars in the USA and UK. However, the food wasn't really free, because people still had to buy their drinks. The bar owners would raise the price of drinks so high that it would cover the cost of the food too.

<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/tanstaaf.html>

**Put all your eggs in one basket** - Put all your hope into just one thing which might fail.

It isn't known how this idiom became popular. It may have started in 1605 from a book titled *Don Quixote*, by the author Miguel Cervantes.

<https://www.theidioms.com/dont-put-all-your-eggs-in-one-basket/>

**Gravy train** - A steady supply of easy money.

This American idiom from the 1920s uses gravy to mean "easy money". Railroad men used the idiom to describe an easy train trip which paid them well. Later, in the 1970s, truck drivers used the idiom "a gravy haul" to mean the same thing: big money for easy work.

<https://culinarylore.com/food-history:origin-of-slang-term-gravy-train/>

**Eat your words** - Admit that something you said was wrong.

This phrase was used in 1836 by the famous author, Charles Dickens, in his first book *The Pickwick Papers*.

<https://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms/eat+your+words.html>

## **Additional websites to learn more about food idioms**

[https://www.spellzone.com/blog/Thirty\\_Idioms\\_about\\_Food.htm](https://www.spellzone.com/blog/Thirty_Idioms_about_Food.htm)

<https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-food-idioms.html>

<http://www.idiomconnection.com/food.html>

<https://7esl.com/food-idioms/>

<https://7esl.com/food-idioms/>

<https://www.english-at-home.com/idioms/food-idioms/>