Culinary Metaphors in Dermatology
Eating Our Words

Emily C. Milam, BA; Euphemia W. Mu, MD; Seth J. Orlow, MD, PhD

Culinary allusions are abundant in medicine, which boasts a descriptive buffet of visual signs and findings. With over 450 analogies documented in the medical literature,1 those pertaining to food are the most plentiful.2,3

Dermatologists especially relish culinary analogies. Food helps us describe color—as in port-wine stains, café au lait macules, and honey-colored crusts of impetigo—and texture—including cauliflower ears, peau d’orange skin, and the cheesy exudate of thrush. Gustatory aromas pervade as well, such as in the sweet, grape-like scent of pseudomonal infections or the smell of stale beer in scrofula. We often use food analogies in instructing patients—for example, to apply a pea-sized amount or a grain-of-rice worth. From the breakfast, lunch, and dinner bedbug bites to the tapioca-like vesicles of dyshidrosis, every meal and food group is covered.

Fruit metaphors in dermatology come in bunches. An apple jelly appearance on discopy suggests lupus vulgaris. Strawberries on the nose or on the tongue can allude to rhinophyma or scarlet fever, and hemangiomas come in both strawberry and cherry varieties. While a child with a blueberry muffin rash may have disseminated neuroblastoma or congenital rubella, someone with a black currant rash could have xero-derma pigmentosum. And don’t confuse the peach fuzz hair in anorexia with the peaches and cream complexion in hypothyroidism.

Getting to the meat of the matter, varicella zoster virus cause chickenpox and the gooseflesh-like skin bumps define keratosis pilaris. The unusual finding of tripe palms is associated with acanthosis nigricans and pulmonary adenocarcinoma. And you can always count on the sausage digits of psoriatic arthritis or the beefy appearance of open wounds.

Seafood also makes a splash with the salmon rash in Still disease and salmon patch (nevus simplex) of infancy. And lest we forget, pubic lice are colloquially known as crabs.

From the spice cabinet, we have grains of salt (or Koplik spots) of measles, the salt and pepper pigmentation of scleroderma, and the cayenne-pepper spots of Schamberg disease.

Dermatopathologists are in on the fun too. There are the histologic banana bodies of ochronosis or bananas on a tree in Spitz nevi. The sandwich sign is indicative of dermatophytosis, and spaghetti and meatballs on potassium hydroxide (KOH) examination of tinea versicolor. Finally, those with a sweet tooth will appreciate the bubble gum collagen in keloids and layer cake pattern in necrobiosis lipoidica.

As this cornucopia of terms suggests, culinary metaphors are widespread in dermatology. Gastronomic terms are useful mnemonics for the well-seasoned practitioner and ripening trainee alike. Food analogies also help us to better connect with our patients and students, digesting complex and abstract medical concepts into bite-sized pieces, so that dermatology can become more palatable, enriched, and fresh.

Author Affiliations: The Ronald O. Perelman Department of Dermatology, New York University School of Medicine, New York.

Corresponding Author: Euphemia W. Mu, MD, The Ronald O. Perelman Department of Dermatology, New York University School of Medicine, 240 E 38th St, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016 (Euphemia.Mu@nyumc.org).


Additional Information: Ms Milam and Dr Mu contributed equally to this article.

Additional Contributions: We thank Nicholas A. Soter, MD, of The Ronald O. Perelman Department of Dermatology, New York University School of Medicine, for his generous support in the research of this topic.