
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Food superstitions



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Rob

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Rob.

Sam

And I'm Sam, and I'm having a boiled egg for lunch today... I'll just sprinkle some salt on top – there!

Rob

Oh, you've spilled some salt on the floor, Sam! Quick, throw some over your left shoulder.

Sam

Throw salt over my shoulder?! What are you talking about, Rob?

Rob

It's bad luck to spill salt!

Sam

Oh dear! It looks like Rob believes in **superstitions** - old beliefs which are based on magic and mystery rather than science. Many superstitions are connected to food, as we'll discover in this programme.

Rob

Right - like throwing salt over your shoulder to stop bad luck.

Sam

Oh come on, Rob! You don't really believe that, do you?

Rob

Well, lots of people *do* believe food superstitions, including otherwise rational, scientific people. For example, have you ever blown out the candles on a birthday cake and made a wish? Or thrown rice over the bride and groom at a wedding?

Sam

Yes to both of those. Maybe I'm more superstitious than I thought!

Rob

Well, before we find out, it's time for a quiz question about another famous food festival – Halloween.

Sam

That's when people carve scary faces into pumpkins to frighten away evil spirits.

Rob

Yes. Right. The tradition of carving pumpkins, or Jack o' Lanterns as they're called in the United States, started out as a Celtic festival in Ireland - but it was the Americans who started using pumpkins. So what vegetable did the Irish originally use to scare away ghosts? Was it:

- a) turnips?
- b) potatoes?, or
- c) squash?

Sam

I'll say b) potatoes.

Rob

OK, Sam, we'll find out the right answer later on. What's for sure is that cultures from around the world have been connecting food and magic for thousands of years, and over time it's created some strange beliefs.

Sam

Here's food historian Tasha Marks describing one unusual superstition to BBC World Service programme, The Food Chain:

Tasha Marks

When you have **superstitions** and they sort of mix with science and health and medicine... and one of the examples of that would be something like garlic which... we all know garlic **wards off** vampires but it's also been thought to **ward off** the 'evil eye', and if you come across the term, the 'evil eye', it's a sort of **blanket term** that sort of applies to any bad luck.

Rob

Tasha says that garlic is believed to **ward off** vampires, meaning to repel or stop someone from harming you.

Sam

According to this superstition, garlic also keeps away the **evil eye** – bad luck or magical spells with the power to cause bad things to happen.

Rob

Tasha describes the ‘evil eye’ as a **blanket term** for any bad luck. Just as a real blanket covers the different parts of your body, a **blanket term** is a phrase that’s used to describe many examples of related things.

Sam

But food superstitions aren’t only about bad luck - they also give our lives meaning.

Rob

Jonty Rajagopalan owns a tourist agency in Hyderabad, India, where she introduces visitors to some of the city’s food traditions.

Sam

Here she is talking with BBC World Service’s, The Food Chain, about a tradition connected with the Hindu New Year. Can you spot the different tastes she mentions?

Jonty Rajagopalan

Some of the traditions give you a little bit of a **lesson**, like every new year, and not 1st January, not the Gregorian calendar New Year, but the Hindu calendar New Year, we would always be given... it’s a kind of a **chutney** which is made of all the five tastes: so you have sour, you have sweet, you have something bitter in it and your mum would always give it to you saying that this is what the rest of the year is going to be – you’ll have happiness, you’ll have challenges, you’ll have a little sadness, you’ll have bitterness in your life, which I think is a very nice tradition – it prepares you for everything in life.

Rob

At Hindu New Year, mothers give their children a special **chutney** – a mixture of fruit, spices, sugar and vinegar. Did you spot the chutney’s flavours, Sam?

Sam

There was sour, sweet and bitter.

Rob

Mothers tell their children that the coming year, like the chutney, will have its own flavours, both good and bad.

Sam

That's why Jonty says that traditions can **teach (you) a lesson** – they show you what you should or shouldn't do in the future, as a result of experience.

Rob

What a lovely way to end our look at food superstitions!

Sam

Yes, maybe we should make chutney at Halloween, instead of carving pumpkins – or whatever vegetable the Irish originally used.

Rob

Ah, yes – in my quiz question I asked you what vegetable was originally used instead of pumpkins to scare away ghosts.

Sam

I guessed it was b) potatoes.

Rob

Which was... the wrong answer! In fact, turnips were originally used, so maybe Irish ghosts are smaller than American ones!

Sam

OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned about **superstitions** – old beliefs which are connected with magic.

Rob

Garlic is supposed to **ward off**, or keep away, dangers like the **evil eye** - bad luck or harmful magic.

Sam

The evil eye is an example of a **blanket term** – a phrase used to describe many examples of related things.

Rob

One Indian superstition involves **chutney** – a food mixing many flavours

Sam

These traditions can **teach you a lesson** - show you how to act in the future based on your past experience.

Rob

Right. Well, that's all for this programme. Good luck with your language learning!

Sam

And if you've enjoyed this topical discussion and want to learn how to use the vocabulary found in headlines, why not try out our News Review podcast? Bye for now!

Rob

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY**superstitions**

old, unscientific beliefs which are connected with magic rather than human reason

ward off

prevent someone or something from harming you; repel

evil eye

bad luck or magical spells which have the power to cause bad things to happen

blanket term

idiomatic phrase used to describe many examples of related things

chutney

foodstuff mixing fruit, spices, sugar and vinegar

teach (you) a lesson

show you what you should or should not do in the future, as a result of experience