Food & Life: metaphors from the Brazilian kitchen

Stephen Thomson Moore

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/st_moore/448/
Brazil Food Talk: Metaphors from the Brazilian Kitchen

Rio de Janeiro - Not surprisingly food, cooking, and eating supply a wealth of metaphors for the creative vernacular, reflecting, of course, the particular culinary practices of Brazil.

Some things are almost universal, of course, with our "daily bread" and its imagery, found in any culture that eats wheat. The basic, fundamental nature of bread is reflected in the saying "Pão, pão, queijo, queijo" (Bread, bread, cheese, cheese). This means "straightforwardly, clearly, simply, without complication or obfuscation", recalling the admonition of the King James Version of the Bible to "let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay". And the spiritual nature of bread is further reflected in the expression "comer o pão que o Diabo amassou" (to eat the bread which the Devil kneaded), that is, to suffer, to pass through many trials. The origin of this expression is unclear - it may refer to the first temptation of Jesus in the desert, reported in Matthew, where the Devil, confronting Jesus after he had fasted for forty days, invites him to assuage his hunger by turning the stones in bread, or possibly to the passage in John where Satan enters into Judas after he has eaten the bread which Jesus gave him. The expression is not to be found in American folklore, but is current in Grenada in the Caribbean.

The ubiquitous presence of fresh bread in the padarias of Brazil (and its low price, and high quality, as established by the government) means that anyone insists on saving a few pennies by eating day-old bread must be really stingy - hence the most common expression for the cheapskate - pão-duro (stale bread). Likewise, when you say that someone is "farinha do mesmo saco" (flour from the same sack) this is always negative (unlike "birds of a feather" in English). For example, Brazilians learned over the last four years that the President Lula’s Workers Party (PT) was just as bad as all the rest, at least according to Adilson Siqueira, a former PT activist, who says that changes in the party meant that it was "farinha do mesmo saco".

But most of the time, at least in Brazil, bread is fresh, hot, and delicious - just like a sexy young man, who in the slang of a few decades ago was a "pão" (bread). The "ão" sound also recalls that of the augmentative ending, something innately masculine - the "pão" might be "bonitão, grandão, fortão, gostosão" (handsome, big, strong, sexy). Those less attractive to the opposite sex might be tagged, on the other hand, as "moscas de padaria" - flies which buzz around the sweet breads, but almost not worth the bother to swat.

Italian food is very common in Brazil, which experienced a major immigration from the peninsula, particularly to the state of São Paulo. Anyone who has been following Brazilian politics recently knows that no matter what the partisan disagreements may be on the surface, sooner or later everything will "acabar em pizza" (end up in pizza). Like a big Italian family, which may have loud and vociferous disagreements, but at the end of the day will sit down and eat at the same table, politicians in Brazil will eventually be sharing a pizza (after all, who doesn’t like pizza?), even if they are from different parties.

Soup is another potent generator of metaphor. The fact that soup requires no chewing makes it a synonym for something easy. A woman who walks by "dando sopa" (giving soup) is one who seems to be an easy target for the lusty male. This doesn't mean that she is necessarily "dando mole" (giving soft), or showing clearly that she is interested. (The final term in this series is "dar em cima", which we would translate in English as "hitting on").
And so something which “não é sopa” (is not soup), is difficult (as in the title of the 1957 film “Titio não é sopa”, which lets us know that Uncle is a handful).

The expression "cair como sopa no mel" seems at first to have to do with soup, but instead has to do with the practice of dipping your bread in something liquid to soften it (or to make it more tasty). In Brazil this would be “molhar” (to moisten), but in Portugal “ensopar”. What is "sopa" is not soup, but a piece of bread which is moistened with honey. This imagery recalls the sexual slang expression (very common in Brazil) “molhar o biscoito” - to moisten the cookie. (Perhaps the most widely known occurrence of this is the popular song by Gabriel o Pensador from 1998 - 2345678 - Tá na hora de molhar o biscoito!)

Brazilians are just as fond of sweets as the rest of the world, if not more so, not surprising in a country with so much sugar cane. Of course, like anything delicious, tasty, and seductive, sweets must be indulged in with moderation, or at least so we are told by the dictum “quem nunca comeu melado quando come se lambuza” (someone who has never eaten molasses licks himself when he finally gets some), the moral being that if you are not used to a pleasure, you overdo it). Sweets are used as terms of endearment - a woman may be “docinho de coco” (coconut candy, but metaphorically sweetie, sweetheart), and an attractive man may be the “rei da cocada preta” (the king of black coconut sweet) - the title of a song by the late sambista Bezerra da Silva, but still very current in contemporary slang.

Not all of these expressions are positive. A "bolo fofo" (fluffy cake) is someone is not too smart. A Brazilian may sarcastically say that someone is “tão doce como doce de jiló” (as sweet as a dessert made from jiló, a famously bitter vegetable). Something that is overly sweet (the English of E. Nesbit’s day would have said “treacle”), from “treacle”) is “melado” (molasses). A vapid film, or indeed anything which is sweet with no nutritive value is “água com açúcar” (sugar water). And perhaps the most common food metaphor in the daily newspapers is that which accused 2006 presidential challenger Geraldo Alckmin, the former governor of the state of São Paulo, of being bland. His opponents claimed that the politician was like a “picolé de chuchu” (a chayote popsicle), a notion about as appetizing as broccoli ice cream (yes, there really is such a thing - according to the Daily Mail). The label stuck, and political cartoon about Alckmin during the campaign included an ever-present chuchu.

Someone who wants guidance from popular wisdom will generally have no problems finding proverbs to support either side of any question. A Brazilian who wants to say that something is easy as pie, a piece of cake (to cite but two food expressions from English) will say "mamão com açúcar" (papaya with sugar). But if he wants to emphasize that no reward comes without a cost, he will tell you that "rapadura é doce, mas não é mole não" (the molasses candy is sweet, but it is hard as a rock), and may go on to add "quer mole senta no pudim!" (you want it easy? sit on the pudding!)

Brazilian Portuguese is rich in food metaphors for the vicissitudes of life. Someone who has "put their foot in it," making a major misstep, is said to "enfiar o pé na jaca", that is step in a jackfruit, a large, green fruit whose innards are gloppy. A complicated mess or problem is said to be "angu de caroço," literally "lumpy corn mush," and what we might call a ruckus in English is a "sururu" (literally, a sort of crab found in salt marshes). A difficult problem that you have to solve means you have to "descascar abacaxi" (peel a pineapple), and such a problem can also be a "pepino" (cucumber - due to the labor necessary to peel it?) Someone talking nonsense is "falando abobrinha" (abobrinha being
the word for squash). Those whose fantasies are far removed from reality are said to "viajar na maionese" (tripping on mayonnaise), or to "pirar na batatinha" (go nuts on potatoes). If you are going to have to suffer together with someone over the long term, that means you will be doing it long enough to "comer um saco de sal juntos" (eat a sack of salt together).

Ideas of food are, of course, ever present in the bedroom, and in relations between the sexes in general. One of the commonest expressions for sex is the verb "comer" (to eat), but used only in the active sense. Both men and women can "eat," though a woman may also "give." A woman who is ill-tempered is often thought to be "mal-comida" (badly eaten). Since, metaphorically, the woman is providing the food to eat, she is often compared to the "panela" (saucepan) in which the food is prepared. Popular wisdom tells us that, in spite of the fascination with youth, "panela velha é que faz comida boa" (it's the old pan that makes good food), a saying incorporated in a popular song by sertanejo star Sergio Reis (a variant says that it is the "galinha velha que da bom caldo" - the old chicken makes good broth). In contrast, we have the "garota Coca-Cola" (Coca-Cola girl), someone with lots of fizz, but who is not nutritious (let's just say that she doesn't put food on the table). Both handsome men and attractive women can be "filé" (filet mignon), but what the Brazilian usually gets at the table, and in bed, is "arroz com feijão" (ordinary, everyday sex). Your partner may be "manteiga derretida" (melted butter), which means that they are sentimental, and if you are truly blessed they will be your "metade da laranja" (your other half). A man will be happy to romance an "uva" (grape - pretty woman), but a woman certainly doesn't want a banana (a wimp).

There are many more expressions to be explored, but as I don't want you to think that I am just "enchendo linguiça" (killing time) we can leave it at that.