Episode Book

EPISODE #5930

The World's Greatest Drunk Foods

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SYNOPSIS

The spice bag was invented around 2006 as a staff meal at a Dublin takeaway. Poutine lives or dies on cheese curds less than a day old. Chimaek became a word during the 2002 World Cup. These aren't ancient traditions — they're recent inventions that got old fast, because a generation grew up ordering them at two in the morning. This episode tours the world's greatest drunk foods country by country, then asks what's actually happening in the brain: why alcohol trips the hypothalamus's starvation alarm, why drinkers reach for salt and pizza instead of water, and whether a stoned craving is even the same craving as a drunk one. The research on THC, it turns out, is stranger than expected.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

It's two in the morning. The bars have shut. And somewhere on the planet, a person who has made several questionable decisions tonight is standing at a counter, ordering something enormous, and it is the single most important thing in the world.



Herman

And it's almost never the dish that country is famous for.



Corn

Which is what Daniel's getting at. He wants a culinary world tour, but through the back door. Not the food a country shows the tourists. The food it eats at two in the morning with the lights off. What are the iconic ones, how did they get tangled up with drinking and nightlife in the first place, what rituals have grown around them. Then he wants the comparison. Do they all share something, the salt and the fat and the carbs and the convenience, or is every country answering the same hunger in a completely different dialect. And finally he wants to know whether a drunk craving and a stoned craving are actually the same craving. He calls it the world's greatest drunk foods and he's not being ironic about it.



Herman

He never is.



Corn

He says make it a journey, with a little science at the end.



Herman

Then let's do the tour before we do the chemistry. Because the first thing you notice, going country by country, is that the food a nation is least famous for internationally is very often the one it loves most at two a.m. Start with the one he named first.



Corn

Ireland. The spice bag.



Herman

And it is exactly what it sounds like. Deep-fried chips, tossed in a salt and chilli seasoning, plus shredded salt and chilli chicken, red and green peppers, sliced chillies, fried onion, all of it shaken together and served in a paper bag. Sometimes with curry sauce on the side. Sometimes in a box, and then it's a spice box, and there are people who will fight you about whether that's the same thing.



Corn

You put a bag of fried food in a box and you've invented a second dish.



Herman

You have, and there's a vegetarian version with fried tofu that people are equally serious about. But here's the part I like. The spice bag is not traditional. It was, best anyone can tell, invented around 2006 as an off-menu staff meal at the Sunflower, a Chinese takeaway in the Orwell Shopping Centre in Templeogue, in Dublin. It was an after-shift thing the staff made for themselves. Friends started asking for it. They put it on the menu. And the first one that turns up on Just Eat is 2012.



Corn

So the mythical ancient Irish dish is younger than the iPhone.



Herman

The Oxford English Dictionary only added "spice bag" in its March 2025 update. It won Ireland's Favourite Takeaway Dish in the 2020 Just Eat awards. There's a tribute Facebook group with seventeen thousand members, and Deliveroo Ireland petitioned in 2021 for a National Spice Bag Day.



Corn

A national day for a 2012 menu item.



Herman

The food critic Russell Alford said it well. It's a bit of a bastardised Chinese dish, but it's ours. And it's gone global now. There's a version at a bar in the East Village in New York, there's a chicken salt fries take on it in Brooklyn, it's turned up in Australia and New Zealand. It's on a menu in Manhattan for nine dollars and in Dublin for thirteen euros.



Corn

Nine dollars in Manhattan. The Irish finally found a way to charge us for the packaging.



Herman

Now cross the Atlantic and drop the seasoning. Canadian poutine. Fries, fresh cheese curds, hot brown gravy, and that's it. It comes out of Quebec's Centre-du-Québec region, and the date most people land on is 1959. There are competing claimants. Fernand Lachance in Warwick, who reportedly said, look at the mess this is going to make, which is where the name comes from. And Jean-Paul Roy in Drummondville, whose restaurant was serving the combination by the late fifties and had it on the menu by 1964.



Corn

Two towns, one dish, sixty years of arguing.



Herman

The one detail that matters is the curds. They have to be fresh, ideally less than a day old, because that's what keeps the squeak. And a busy poutinerie gets through a hundred kilos of them a day.



Corn

A hundred kilos of cheese that squeaks.



Herman

And the squeak isn't a joke, it's chemistry. Fresh curds are basically cheese that hasn't finished its work. The proteins are still loosely bound, so when you bite them they rub against your teeth and make that sound. Leave them a day and the acidity drops, the proteins tighten up, and you've got a rubbery lump that tastes fine and squeaks not at all. So the entire dish lives or dies on a supply chain measured in hours.



Corn

Which is why you can't really get a proper one outside Quebec.



Herman

You can get something called poutine. You cannot get the squeak. And there are people in Montreal who will tell you that with real distress in their voice.



Corn

Then Korea. Chimaek. Chicken and beer, and the word for it.



Corn

Chicken and beer isn't a dish, that's a Tuesday.



Herman

It's the pairing that's the dish. Chimaek is fried chicken served as anju, food that exists to go with alcohol. The modern form came in with draft beer spreading through Korea in the 1970s. But the word itself, chimaek, isn't used until the 2002 Korea-Japan World Cup, when the whole country is sitting in front of screens eating chicken and drinking beer, and it just collapses into one syllable. Before that, in the seventies, a chicken cost three thousand four hundred won and five hundred millilitres of beer cost four hundred and fifty.



Corn

So the national dish was named by a football tournament.



Herman

And the restaurants went from around ten thousand to twenty-five thousand after the World Cup. Then in 2013 there's a chimaek festival in Ningbo, in China, that draws four hundred thousand people in three days.



Corn

Four hundred thousand people for chicken and beer. In China.



Herman

And the delivery culture around it is its own thing. In Seoul there are whole streets where every other storefront is a chicken place, and they all deliver, and the delivery riders are on scooters with heated boxes, and on a Friday night the whole city is basically one giant chimaek operation running at full capacity. It's not a snack you grab. It's infrastructure.



Corn

Now the one that most listeners outside Australia have never heard of, and it's the one that got away. The pie floater. It's a meat pie, turned upside down, sitting in a bowl of pea soup, with tomato sauce on top.



Corn

Upside down in soup.



Herman

It's a South Australian icon, and it was sold off mobile pie carts. A Scottish pastry cook called James Gibbs emigrated in the 1880s and set up one of the first carts in Adelaide. At the peak, late eighteen hundreds, there were about thirteen carts on the streets. By the late 1950s, three. By 2011, none.



Corn

A whole street food tradition, gone inside a century.



Herman

Peter Goers, who's an Adelaide broadcaster, said the truest thing anyone's said about any of these dishes. Pie floaters taste better if you're drunk. Some would say you'd have to be drunk to eat one.



Corn

That's the whole genre in two sentences.



Herman

Then Germany, which is currywurst. There's a Herbert Grönemeyer song about it from 1982, and it's really a song about the drinking culture that carried the sausage into the hearts of the inebriated. And Britain, which is the post-pub kebab. The Manchester Evening News, writing about the famous seven pound fifty version, calls it perhaps no more iconic Big Friday Night out food than the humble kebab.



Corn

They wrote that sentence sober.



Herman

Now step back, because there's a pattern in that list. Almost nothing on it is old. The spice bag is 2006. Chimaek as a word is 2002. The pie floater went from thirteen carts to zero inside living memory. Poutine is 1959, which sounds old until you put it next to the countries it comes from. These are not ancient traditions. They're recent inventions that got old fast, because a generation grew up ordering them at two in the morning and now can't imagine the country without them.



Corn

Mythical status is just nostalgia with a short memory.



Herman

The craving creates the tradition, and then the tradition pretends it was always there. That's the arc of every one of these dishes.



Corn

We did an episode a while back on how Ireland's licensing laws and Chinese immigration invented the two a.m. Dublin takeaway in the first place. The spice bag is just the final form of something that podcast already predicted.



Herman

Right, the takeaway came first, the licensing gave it a reason to exist, and then somebody needed a flagship. So those are the dishes. Now why do they hit the spot quite so spectacularly.



Corn

Because the obvious answer is wrong, isn't it. Everyone assumes alcohol makes you feel full. Warm, heavy, done for the night.



Herman

Alcohol is the second most calorie-dense nutrient there is, after fat, and it stimulates eating rather than suppressing it. Which sounds like a contradiction until you look at what it's actually doing in the brain. There's a study in Nature Communications from 2017, the group was looking at Agrp neurons in the hypothalamus, which are sometimes called the brain's starvation alarm. These are the cells that fire when you need calories, and they drive you to go find them. And what they found is that ethanol activates those neurons. Then they silenced the Agrp cells, and the alcohol-induced overeating went away entirely, in mice.



Corn

So the beer doesn't fill you up. It trips the alarm that says you're starving.



Herman

And that's not a modern problem. The paper points out that the practice of the apéritif, a drink before the meal to open the appetite, is documented at least as far back as the fifth century. People figured out the effect long before anyone could name the neuron.



Corn

Fifteen hundred years of noticing that one drink makes you want dinner.



Herman

Then there's the behavioural side. There's a study out of the University at Buffalo from 2018, two hundred and eighty-six college students in the Midwest, and what they found is that people who'd been drinking were more likely to eat right before bed. And the foods they went for were the salty things and pizza. Here's the detail that actually surprised me. They did not drink more water.



Corn

So they're dehydrated and eating salt.



Herman

Which makes the dehydration worse. The lead author's explanation is that alcohol sends blood glucose up and then down, and the drop is what the brain reads as hunger. And the arithmetic is brutal. A beer is about a hundred and fifty calories. Five beers is seven hundred and fifty, which is roughly a third of a day's energy before you've eaten anything. Then two slices of pizza land on top of it, and as the study puts it, that's a recipe for weight gain.



Corn

So the sequencing is the problem. Beer is the appetiser you didn't plan for.



Herman

And it's worth saying the salt isn't incidental either. Alcohol makes you lose sodium, so you're walking around with a mild deficit, and a bag of chips is basically a correction. Your body isn't being stupid. It's solving the problem it's been handed, badly, at two in the morning.



Corn

It's doing its best.



Herman

It's doing its best with the tools available. Now here's where Daniel's question gets interesting, because everything I've just described is alcohol. Cannabis is a completely different mechanism, and this is where the research got strange. There's a study that came out this year in PNAS, out of Washington State and the University of Calgary. Eighty-two volunteers, aged twenty-one to sixty-two, and instead of smoking, they vaped THC under controlled conditions. Twenty milligrams or forty milligrams, or a placebo.



Corn

Two doses.



Herman

And what they found is that cannabis increased energy intake, and it did it in the first thirty minutes. It didn't matter which dose they got. It didn't matter whether they were male or female, their BMI, or how long it had been since they last ate. It worked regardless. And then the part that matters for the craving question. It increased intake of all the macronutrients, but it didn't change the proportion. So it wasn't pushing them toward fat or sugar or carbs specifically. It was just more food.



Corn

It doesn't tell you what to eat. It just tells you to eat.



Herman

Then they did the animal work. In rats, cannabis abolished pre-existing macronutrient preferences. Whatever the rat normally liked, that stopped mattering. And it drove eating even in animals that were already full. Ryan McLaughlin, one of the authors, described it like this. The sober animals are, I'm full, why do I care. Then you get them stoned again, and even though they're now full, they go right back as if they're starving.



Corn

Because they are, as far as the brain can tell.



Herman

And here's the mechanism, which is the crux of the whole thing. The munchies are brain-mediated, not gut-mediated. When they blocked the CB1 receptors out in the body, the appetite didn't change. When they blocked the same receptors centrally, in the brain, it did. And cannabis did not move any of the hormones you'd expect. Ghrelin, insulin, GLP-1, leptin, none of them shifted.



Corn

So it's not the stomach sending a message up. The brain has already decided.



Herman

In the words of the team, THC hijacks that system. Even if you're not hungry, it hits the cannabinoid receptors in the brain and makes you feel hungry. Matthew Hill put the surprise plainly. They thought it would make the rats want carb-rich food. It didn't seem to. It just seemed to be any food.



Corn

So Daniel's question has an answer, and it's not the one he was expecting. Alcohol points you at salt and fat. Cannabis just points.



Herman

And now the detail that I cannot explain and neither can the researchers. The top food the participants gravitated toward was beef jerky.



Corn

Jerky?



Herman

Not chocolate. Not chips. Jerky. And Carrie Cuttler, one of the authors, said exactly what you're thinking. Which I don't understand.



Corn

It's the one snack that fights back.



Herman

The honest position is that nobody has put alcohol and cannabis head to head in the same people, comparing what they reach for. It doesn't exist. What we've got is one line of research showing salt and fat and pizza after drinking, and another showing no preference at all after THC. Which means Daniel's framing, same craving, different answers, is probably truer for alcohol than it is for cannabis. Alcohol is asking a specific question. Cannabis isn't asking anything. It's just saying yes.



Corn

Then that settles the universal question in a way I didn't expect.



Herman

How so?



Corn

If cannabis makes you eat anything, then the specific dish you reach for has nothing to do with biology. It's pure culture. The stoned person in Dublin reaches for a spice bag and the stoned person in Seoul reaches for chicken because that's what's within reach, not because their brain requested it.



Herman

And if alcohol is driving salt and fat specifically, then the universal traits are doing real work. Everybody's going to land on something salty and greasy. Which is why you get the same shape of dish in a dozen countries.



Corn

But not the same dish. Because the shape is biology and the delivery is local.



Herman

There's one more layer, and it's the least romantic one. Look at what's actually common across the pie cart, the kebab shop, the twenty-four-hour bakery, the Chinese takeaway. It isn't a flavour. It's a closing time. The food may matter less than what's still open when the bars empty out. The spice bag exists because there was a Chinese takeaway open on the way home. The Adelaide pie carts were a distribution system for food at the only hours nobody else was selling it.



Corn

The real common denominator is availability. Salt and fat are how it gets your money after that.



Herman

Which is exactly what makes it so hard to export. You can put the dish on a menu anywhere. You can't put the two a.m. walk home on a menu.



Hilbert

The word's wrong. You keep saying drunk food. My mother called it something else and she was right. It's a clean-out meal. You eat what's left because the shop's about to close and the man wants to go home, and whatever's in the tray goes in the bag because throwing it out is a sin. Curried chips, bits of sausage, half an onion. The bag's the point. Everyone gets it in a bag.



Herman

The dish isn't designed.



Hilbert

Nothing was designed. It's whatever survived the night. On Beechwood Avenue, a place called Mulligan's, and the man's name was Dessie, and he rang a bell at one in the morning. Not a real bell. A bell off a bicycle. I timed it once. Forty seconds after the last bell the trays came down and he was gone. If you were still walking, you were eating nothing.



Corn

Forty seconds.



Hilbert

It cost one pound twenty. That was the whole bag. One pound twenty, and I know that because I paid it in coins for a year. And the thing about Dessie is he only ever had one bag left by the time I got there, and he knew what was in it, and he'd hold it up and say, this is what's in it, take it or go home. So you took it.



Herman

You took the bag.



Hilbert

Everyone took the bag. But one night he made a mistake, and he knows he made it, and I've never let him forget it. The only bag left had the last of the sausage and the last of the curry and I said, is that a full bag, and he said, it's a full bag. It was not a full bag. He'd put the onion in after he said it. There was a whole layer of onion at the bottom of that bag that I did not pay for and did not order and could not have known about.



Corn

You were charged for onion.



Hilbert

I wasn't charged for it. That's worse. It was in there and I didn't know, so I ate it. I ate an onion I never agreed to. That was the night I stopped trusting the man, and I kept buying from him for two more years.



Herman

Two more years.



Hilbert

He was the only one with the bell.



Herman

The forty seconds is the part I'd keep.



Hilbert

Forty seconds. And he closed in the end, and the trays went to his brother's garage, and they're still in the garage.



Corn

I'm never going to trust a closing time again.



Herman

The thing I keep coming back to is the forty seconds. The window. You can put a dish on any menu in the world, but you can't export the two a.m. version of it, and that's why this stuff stays local.



Corn

Which leaves the question the whole episode is circling. If cannabis makes you eat anything at all, and alcohol makes you eat salt and fat, then what exactly is the universal drunk food? Because on that evidence it's a shape and not a dish. The salt, the fat, the carbs, the thing in a bag at one in the morning. But the spice bag and the chimaek and the pie floater are answers to a local question that happens to share a shape.



Herman

Chefs keep trying to take the shape and make it respectable. Foie gras poutine. Thirteen-euro spice bags. But Eater made the point that upscaling it too much robs it of its one a.m. effortless cool. The mess is the thing. You polish it and it stops working.



Corn

The honest answer to Daniel is both. Biology sets the shape. Culture fills it in. And the myth gets written afterwards.



Herman

Which is why I'd bet on the spice bag turning up in another ten cities before it turns up in one fine-dining room. The dish travels. The hour doesn't.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode twenty-three twenty-two, How Licensing Laws Invented a Takeaway. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you want to send us a prompt, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. Tell us what you'd eat at one in the morning.



Corn

We'll be back soon.

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