

THE MUSEUM OF FOREIGN GROCERIES

by Steve Portigal

The cultural embodiment of curious groceries provides me much pleasure—seeing the ordinary and everyday turned bizarre, amusing, wonderful. A number of years ago I began to collect groceries (and other things found in food or drug stores) that exemplify some aspect of their culture of origin (including American culture, since every place is “foreign” to someone living elsewhere.) I assembled these found items into an informal museum (displayed throughout our home and also on the web). The museum is not juried—it’s barely curated and probably tells you more about the lenses I wear than anything else. It raises questions like, are there universal affordances for packaging (beyond the usability aspects of how and what to open) or are affordances culturally defined? Our reactions to “foreign” phrases and imagery reveal cultural differences of interest, as well as provide basic delight. 🖐️



PLOP CHOCO, 2004
BELGIUM
CHOCOLATE-COVERED BISCUITS

Unintended meanings are often found in onomatopoeic names, such as “PLOP.” We wouldn’t name a chocolatey product PLOP, fearing the inevitable associations of a childish mind. Maybe Belgians associate the name simply with a sound effect or with a more benign meaning, such as a satisfied burp, a sleepy dog, or a generous portion of topping being poured. Or are they making the same association as us but are more tolerant of it?



VEGETARIAN SWALLOW BALLS, 2007
USA (PRODUCT OF TAIWAN)
“HOTPOT.BAKED IN POT. BARBECUS.
FRIED.SOUP FOR TASTE.”

I have a particular fondness for the obvious humor of unintended meanings, even better if it’s somewhat puerile. Take Swallow Balls: do birds even have balls? Or is the name intended to instruct how you should consume them (e.g. don’t chew!)?



CORNY, 2004
GERMANY
CHOCOLATE-BAKED ENERGY BAR.
CONTAINS FIVE GRAINS: BARLEY, OATS,
STEINSPILT, RYE, AND WHEAT

Corn (as an ingredient, or even as an idea) appears in surprising places in other food cultures. In Asia, it is a pizza topping, a stuffing for pie (caution: filling is hot), and served in a cup at McDonald’s. And on the other extreme, Germany’s “Corn” bar ironically contains no corn. Yet something about the name “Corn” is refreshingly direct, suggesting (to us) a flavor, while almost naively ignoring the pejorative meaning that we attach to the word.



FUKIGEN, 2002
JAPAN
CARBONATED MILK DRINK

I bought this Asahi beverage from a vending machine in Tokyo as a low-risk experiment. It was good, but I had a hard time describing it to my colleagues. It was sweet, it was bubbly, it was white. But only one of those is a taste word! Since I don't read Japanese, I didn't know its name, so we just called it "Angry Boy." Someone later explained to me that the boy on the bottle is telling us that if we don't want to feel like him, we should drink this. He highlights the need rather than the benefit, while a Western message would typically lead with the positive—a little boy smiling and leaping high into the sky, telling us that if we drink this, we will feel like him. We might assume that this is the Japanese approach, but it appears this is a unique example, perhaps leveraging the presumed Yoshimoto Nara character on the bottle. Now try to imagine a Western bottle featuring Darth Vader with a similarly inverted message.



RAMNATH'S SOYA HEALTH DRINK, 2006
INDIA
POWDER TO BE MIXED WITH HOT MILK.
CONTAINS SOYA, WHEAT, JAGGERY,
PULSES

The package of Ramnath's Soya Health Drink (Badam Flavour) evokes a snake-oil remedy. It exemplifies the earnest advertising messages commonly found in India, coupled with an equally common lack of visual sophistication. India (as we are often told) is increasingly adopting and adapting both global brands and national brands that have the design and branding savvy of Pepsi. Even now, Ramnath's Soya Health Drink sits on the shelf next to those other brands. Will it survive?



PRINGLES (FUNKY SOY SAUCE), 2000
JAPAN
FLAVORED POTATO CRISPS

Designs meant to push the edge of the envelope in one culture can end up blowing minds in another culture. Here's a familiar product with an unfamiliar taste combination: Pringles that are soy sauce flavored. And as if that wasn't enough, the soy apparently is funky. One can only wonder at how exactly soy sauce gets to be funky! For a nice list of Pringles flavors worldwide go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pringles>.



LUCKY ELEPHANT PINK CANDY POPCORN,
CA. 2004
CANADA
POPCORN IN A BRIGHT PINK COATING

Lucky Elephant is a childhood classic from Canada—iconic pink popcorn and bold packaging graphics that don't seem to have changed since the 1970s. The museum includes a number of Canadian items, foreign but familiar to me, being an expatriate. When I first moved to the U.S., I was significantly traumatized to discover that many of my favorite foods were missing in action. Gone was Kraft Peanut Butter, the most common brand of peanut butter in Canada. The American rebranding of Kraft Dinner as Kraft Macaroni & Cheese (although it does say “dinner” in much smaller letters) rendered the common nickname, “KD,” meaningless. Hearty and delicious French-Canadian Pea Soup is sadly unavailable here. Is it any wonder that online shops like Canada Only exist to sell familiar stuff to Canadians living in the U.S.?



MED, 2004
CZECH REPUBLIC
HONEY

The culturally created design language of packaging is powerful. This is honey, not sunblock. We must resist the urge to apply its contents topically and instead imagine ingesting them. Does this make sense to the intended purchasers? Or do we have common semiotics with the Czech consumer, who sees this as merely playful?



WATER SEIELD, 2005
USA (PRODUCT OF CHINA)
CONTAINS WATER SEIELD,
MOUNTAINOUS SOUNTAIN, AND
GLACIAL ACETIC ACID

Another example of the power of packaging is this unappealing (to say the least) bottle of what seems to be green beans floating in water. What does the bottle suggest? Go ahead, twist the cap off, tilt your head back, pour back its cold, refreshing, contents, wipe your mouth with the back of your hand and exhale “ahhhhh!” That impulse is in jarring discord with the chewy greens that end up in your mouth. In contrast, green beans in a can fit our visual palette, with an expectation that one should heat the can’s contents up. So are green beans in a bottle bad design in any culture? Or is it simply expedient design, making use of inexpensively sourced bottles? Or are the intended consumers familiar with this presentation? A thousand ethnographic studies await.