

The International Year of Fruits and Vegetables

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Thanks to the go-getting enthusiasm of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the world feasted on the International year of Quinoa in 2013. We were nourished by the International year of the Potato back in 2008. Pulses had their place in the spotlight in 2016, along with rice in 2004. And now, we have stepped across the threshold of The International Year of Fruits and Vegetables, so new and shiny it doesn't even have a Wikipedia page. Yet.

Now I don't want to be too negative here, although my gut feeling is that these international years of this and that don't actually change much. But let's just give them the benefit of the doubt and see what this particular year is about.

Immediately, I foresee problems. Fruits and vegetables. Is this going to get us into a fight over whether a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable?

Off I go to check the official site. Luckily, there's an official definition.

What are Fruits and Vegetables? "Fruits and vegetables are considered edible parts of plants (e.g. seed bearing structures, flowers, buds, leaves, stems, shoots and roots), either cultivated or harvested wild, in their raw state or in a minimally processed form."

But if you think about it, edible parts of plants, that's almost everything. So the definition helpfully excludes lots of things explicitly.

Starchy roots and tubers. That would be potatoes, sweet potatoes and cassava. But not their leaves, which may be eaten as vegetables.

And pulses and cereals, unless they are harvested immature. So that's your green beans and baby corn.

It also excludes nuts, seeds and oilseeds, medicinal herbs and spices "unless used as vegetables", stimulants, such as coffee, tea and cacao, and processed and ultraprocessed products made from fruits and vegetables. So that's your plant-based burger out of the list. And – specifically — ketchup.

Which offers a great starting point to enter the wacky world of fruits and vegetables.

The FAO says ketchup is specifically not a vegetable. If you're of a certain age, however, you may remember Ronald Reagan's dastardly efforts to have ketchup classified as a vegetable. But you would be misremembering. Long story short, budget cuts in the early 1980s reduced the funding for school meals in the US by about 25%. But the lunches still had to provide a mandated level of adequate nutrition. So the Food and Nutrition Service came up with a proposal to let schools substitute items that met nutritional recommendations and guidelines. The Service's report said that school lunches "could credit a condiment such as pickle relish as a vegetable."

It did not mention ketchup.

But opponents of the budget cuts focussed their anger on ketchup as a vegetable. Other substitutions – like peanut butter to replace half the specified meat – did not attract nearly as much attention.

I don't want to argue about whether ketchup is or is not a vegetable. I mean, clearly it isn't. On this I totally agree with the FAO. The point is that seemingly small, nit-picky details can in fact have an outsized impact on the nutritiousness of school meals.

And if you were, maybe, inclined to give ketchup the benefit of the doubt, I should mention that if a slice of school lunch pizza in the US contains two tablespoons – about 30 ml — of tomato paste then that pizza is, at the moment, counted as a vegetable. Efforts to double the minimum amount of tomato paste for pizza to in fact become a vegetable were roundly defeated in 2011.

Of course another way to look at this is to say that ketchup cannot possibly be a vegetable, because a tomato is a fruit.

The distinction is an utterly stupid one that confuses how you prepare the edible part of a plant to actually eat it, with how a botanist sees that part of the plant. And yet, legally speaking, a tomato is indeed a vegetable, not a fruit, at least in the US.

This one rests on a classic legal case, *Nix v Hedden*, which went all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1893. The problem was the Tariff Act of 1883, which levied a tax on imported vegetables, but not

imported fruits. John Nix, a big importer of fruits and vegetables, sued to get back the tax he had been forced to pay on tomatoes, which are, indeed, fruits, botanically speaking.

Both sides, for the plaintiff and for the defence, relied extensively on dictionary definitions. Against the plaintiff's tomato-as-a-fruit were ranged the defence's pea, eggplant, squash and pepper – all botanical fruits that are unquestionably vegetables. And against that, Mr Nix's lawyers replied with potato, turnip, parsnip, cauliflower, cabbage, carrot and bean. Whether you think they are vegetables or not, they're certainly not fruits.

The judges, in their infinite wisdom, unanimously found in favour of the ordinary meaning of the word vegetable. Tomatoes are vegetables because they are ordinarily eaten as the main course, rather than as dessert.

And yet, and yet ...

Over on this side of the Atlantic, the European Union has its fair share of definitions that challenge common sense. Famously, at least in vegetable nerd circles, there's Council Directive 2001/113/EC, "relating to fruit jams, jellies and marmalades and sweetened chestnut purée intended for human consumption".

That just goes and pulls a complete Humpty Dumpty in its definitions. For the EU, a word means exactly what they say it means.

"For the purposes of this Directive, tomatoes, the edible parts of rhubarb stalks, carrots, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, melons and water-melons are considered to be fruit,"

The first three, of course, are not even botanically fruits. But other than in EC directives, when are carrots and sweet potatoes fruits? Well, there's carrot halva. And sweet potato pie.

How you prepare it, and how you eat it is, for me and, I would hope, most sensible people, the key difference between a fruit and a vegetable, but it really is not a hill I am prepared to die on.

Mostly, those discussions seem to me to be an opportunity for the expression of unlimited pedantry. It's a good thing the FAO excluded nuts, seeds and oilseeds, because nuts provide even more opportunities for fake confusion.

Just recently I came across this prissy sentence:

“Peanut butter, the everyman staple, which contains neither butter nor nuts (peanuts are legumes), originated as a health food of the upper classes.”

I just wonder. Was the author especially proud of that? Or was it forced on him by the fearsome fact checkers of the New Yorker?

Still the pointless discussions rage on. Nothing, it seems, will ever settle the essential is X a fruit or a vegetable question to anybody's satisfaction.

Take avocados. Vegetable, right, as least as far as the Supreme Court might see it. But on a trip to Indonesia a few years ago I was offered an avocado milkshake at one of our meal stops. Nothing ventured and all that, I tried it. Absolutely delicious, although the additional sugar might have had a little to do with that.

And of course if you ask Google Is avocado ... it says A fruit before you've even finished typing. A berry, in fact, just like a tomato. And bananas are berries too, but for the millions of people in the Great Lakes region of Africa, banana is ... well, not exactly a vegetable, but their main starchy staple.

Moving on from actual, botanical fruits, consider what the EU calls “the edible parts of rhubarb stalks“. Unless you have access to the youngest, tenderest, pale pink stalks of forced rhubarb (for which I would pay a king's ransom right now), no part of the rhubarb stalk is actually edible. It isn't the toxic oxalic acid, which is mostly concentrated in the leaves, but their sheer mouth-puckering acidity. Uncooked, in my view, rhubarb is neither fruit nor vegetable.

But by contrast celery – botanically identical to rhubarb stalks – could never become a fruit under any circumstances that I can imagine.

Of course I am looking at the whole question of fruits and vegetables through the lens of my own culture. What else could I do? So I don't even know how common the distinction is in other cultures. Do the people of the Great Lakes region of Africa have categories for fruits and vegetables. If they do, maybe they put cooking bananas in one and

sweet bananas in the other. I'd love to know whether this is even a problem in other cultures.

Thinking – possibly far too much – about this, I do have a few suggested rules.

Things we (rather than botanists) call fruits are generally sweet. I'm discounting rhubarb here, obviously, and borderline cases like carrots and sweet potatoes. How sweet? That's tricky. Tomatoes, like so much else, have become sweeter and sweeter, and some are probably sweeter than many fruits.

Edward Behr, editor of the wonderful Art of Eating newsletter, has exquisitely refined taste. And he says that if a tomato were as sweet as a fully ripe Comice pear "presumably we wouldn't like it". I'm not so sure. But presumably we wouldn't consider it a vegetable either. And boiling an onion in sugar syrup to make so-called onion jam does not somehow turn a vegetable into a fruit.

Things we call fruits are generally, but not necessarily, botanical fruits. Aside from rhubarb, again, I'm thinking of things like yacon and jicama, maybe sugarcane stalks. Not your average fruits, I agree, but definitely fruity. But things botanists call fruits are actually much more likely to be known as vegetables, not fruits. And vegetables takes in many, many more edible parts of plants than fruits.

I hope that settles it, once and for all, but I doubt it.

As for FAO and the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables, I don't suppose it will do any harm. I can't find any evidence that any previous International Years of this or that achieved anything that couldn't have been achieved without an international year. I mean, I have a gorgeous coffee table book on potatoes that was published for that year. But it could have been done at any time. Maybe the International Year is like a temporary dose of fertiliser for the money tree.

And I am of course very grateful to FAO for giving me a topic for this first podcast of the new year and a new season.

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