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# Oxford Word of the Month – September: burnt chop syndrome

*noun*: (esp. of a woman) the practice or habit of taking the least attractive item or option; the practice or habit of putting the needs and desires of others ahead of one's own.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Several years ago an Australian journalist described the experience of playing Monopoly with her family: 'My brothers fought over the racing car while Mum and I angled for the boot—though she would always give it up for something else because, you know, burnt chop syndrome.' (*Northern Territory News*, 27 December 2015) The writer's use of **burnt chop syndrome** is likely to have puzzled some readers. It's a reference to the mother's practice of allowing others to have what they want, in this case the best Monopoly token, and making do with what is left.

If the habit of domestic sacrifice is a universal mothering trait, **burnt chop syndrome** is an Australian (and New Zealand) way to describe it. It derives from the literal notion that mothers will choose the least appealing chop at mealtimes: 'The **burnt chop syndrome** existed in even the most blissful marriage. ... Dad got the best chop and Mum got the worst.' (*Sydney Sun-Herald*, 27 October 1991) The habit has been associated with traditional, mid-century perceptions of domesticity:

*[John] Howard, on the other hand, harkens to the 1950s for his perfect family. He conjures up the days when the family could sleep with the front door open on hot summer nights, Mum ate the burnt chop, and Leave it to Beaver flickered on the set. (Sydney Morning Herald, 29 November 1988)*

The first evidence of the term appears in the 1980s in a women's self-help guide from New Zealand—the only other nation to use the term—and refers to mealtime sacrifice: 'As food providers, most of us are familiar with the "burnt-chop" syndrome, where we give the "best" food to everyone else, and serve ourselves with what is left.' (Singh & Rosier, *No Body's Perfect*, 1989)

Although **burnt chop syndrome** is used here in the context of a family meal, the *burnt chop* element is not strictly literal, but alludes to the least attractive option. Later use of the term often has a broader meaning: ‘Did maternal martyrdom in your house (often known as the **burnt chop syndrome**) express itself thus: “You have the last piece” or, “Of course I don't mind”?’ (Adelaide *Sunday Mail*, 9 May 1999)

Like many colourful Australian terms, it can also be found in a political context. Here the metaphor of domestic sacrifice is applied to gender inequality:

*Women in the ALP call it the burnt chop syndrome. When it comes to serving out the political meals, it is the woman who always seems to get the burnt chop, and dry, charred and unsatisfying as it is, she has to try and make a meal out of it.* (Melbourne's *The Age*, 29 November 1997)

But the term is still used chiefly of mothers on the domestic front. In recent years some evidence for a related term has appeared: ‘I don't want to raise a future “burnt chop mother” who denies her appetite for food, sex, power and success and anything else.’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2014) *Burnt chop mother* is likely to have been influenced by **burnt chop syndrome**, and we are on the lookout for the development of this and any other allusive uses of *burnt chop* in Australian English.

**Burnt chop syndrome** will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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