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Oxford Word of the Month – November: chicken salt

noun: a type of spiced salt used for flavouring, esp. with hot chips.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Many Australians love to flavour their take-away hot chips with something known as **chicken salt**. In recent years, this much-loved condiment has begun to go global, with people in the USA and the UK becoming increasingly familiar with it.

One online writer, Johnny Lieu, describes the flavour:

Featuring a very addictive umami flavour that has hints of garlic or onion, it sometimes even has a bit of paprika. With the right amount, it is delightful. (‘What the hell is chicken salt?’ Mashable.com, 5 January 2017)

Chicken salt is essentially flavoured salt, usually containing some combination of garlic, pepper, paprika, onion powder, and chicken flavouring; however, different companies include different spices. Variants exist in other cuisines: the British have something known as *chip spice* and the Americans enjoy *seasoned salt*.

The origins of **chicken salt** are disputed. It is definitely a South Australian invention, and is claimed to have been created by Mitani, a spice company in Adelaide, in the 1970s. According to the business’s owners, Loui and Trianka Mitani, the salt was invented to be used on chicken, but chicken shop owners began to use it on the chips they sold. From the 1990s, it was sold as a retail product, and various rival products are available.

However, Peter Brinkworth has claimed that he invented it, and that he sold the product through his wholesale business run out of the town of Gawler in South Australia. Mitani bought his business sometime around 1980, he claims.

Whatever the origin, **chicken salt** has become a staple in Australian take-aways. It is so loved that when one takeaway owner tried to charge a ‘salt surcharge’, he was the target of an online hate campaign and was accused of being ‘un-Australian’:

Forster Beach Bums Cafe owner Darrin Cornall has backed away from his 20c chicken salt surcharge, ‘dreading’ another day of online hate after attackers piled

on ... with his wife and young family suffering from the backlash Mr Cornall backed down yesterday and removed the 20c charge. Mr Cornall said he had never charged paying customers but introduced the 20c salt tax 18 months ago when blow-ins would ask for salt after buying food from competitors. (Daily Telegraph, 24 April 2018)

Food terms are common in Australian English, and chicken salt is one more to add to the list.

Chicken salt will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

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