

Town Nicknames: Savvy or Silly?



In *Romeo & Juliet*, Juliet asks, “What is in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Shakespeare’s statement doesn’t always hold up to modern sensibilities. Despite Juliet’s sentiments about the feuding Capulets and Montagues, names do matter. A rose by a different name does smell sweeter.

Just ask the prune. The prune suffers from poor connotation: Its geriatric associations have made it a hard sell to the under-70 set. To solve that problem, marketers now refer to prunes by what they technically are—dried plums. *Voilà!* Score one for the marketers. Likewise, rapeseed oil sales increased when the name was changed to canola oil. And in the 1980s, when mushroom marketers coined the Italian-sounding word “portabella,” sales of the previously hard-to-sell mature brown button/cremini mushrooms skyrocketed. Changing the name increased the appeal. Will this strategy work for high-fructose corn syrup, currently being repackaged as corn sugar?

Locally, a fascinating and quite heated debate focuses on town nick-

names. I stumbled upon it while reading an online review of the new restaurant Treva in West Hartford. While there were plenty of comments after the article, few concerned the restaurant. Instead, many individuals were outright furious that the writer referred to West Hartford as “WeHa.” It got me thinking about whether—like food names—a town or region’s name or nickname influences our feelings about it. Should Glastonbury and the Farmington Valley have nicknames? If so, what would they be?

Although a seemingly trivial issue, a town or region’s nickname strikes an emotional nerve. A name ties in with a sense of identity, and a new moniker alters this. In the WeHa dispute, I notice that people fall into one of four schools of thought. Some despise WeHa, but would be fine with another name. Some loathe the idea of giving ANY town, region, or neighborhood a nickname. Some are fine with abbreviations for urban areas, but find that West Hartford is too small to warrant an abbreviated version. Lastly, some people like the nickname.

I am in the first category. Abbreviated names can create a sense of urbane sophistication. Case in point: New York City’s abbreviations and acronyms: TriBeCa (Triangle Below Canal Street), SoHo (South of Houston Street), and DUMBO (Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass). West Hartford’s slogan is “Where city style meets village charm.” If WeHa makes you think modern, upscale, and friendly, then the name works. If not, it fails. ADK (The Adirondacks), BRK (The Berkshires), and ACK (the airport code for Nantucket) make for chic bumper stickers. We instantly think European stylishness. How would WeHa look on a bumper sticker?

Consider the overall marketing strategy for Glastonbury and the Farmington Valley. “Close to everything you want to do, yet worlds away from city life” is the slogan on the Farmington Valley Visitors Association website. A name with an urban vibe, such as FaVa, would be inappropriate. Besides fava is already a bean. Glastonbury is a long name, so I envision the Millennial Generation using shorthand for it. Following in the footsteps of Long Island, New York, towns—East Hampton (EH), Sag Harbor (SGH), Bridgehampton (BH)—Glastonbury could be GB. But isn’t that a lot like OC—Orange County, California? I’m trying to visualize *The Real Housewives of GB*. Forget it. Let’s stick with Glastonbury. ■

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