

Epitaphs—text carved into grave-stones to honor the dead—have evolved over the centuries with changing religious and cultural beliefs. What once implored those passing to “remember this” now say “remember me.”

In 18th-century America, evocations of skulls and crossbones reflected a bleak Puritan picture of the afterlife. Messages repeated throughout burial grounds urged the bereaved to repent and prepare for judgment with gravestone tympanum-top refrains of “O! Relentless Death!” and “Memento Mori” (“remember you must die”).

But as Victorian ideals took hold in the 1800s, so did a romanticized view of mortality. Cherubs, flowers and bird symbology came to replace skulls, and cemeteries became landscaped parks where families picnicked among the dearly departed. Epitaph imperatives were softened to phrases like “Budded on earth to bloom in heaven,” and “Gone home.”

As life expectancies lengthened and engraving technology improved, epitaphs became more celebratory, reflecting the unique personalities of the deceased (as with hypochondriac B.P. Roberts’ famous “I told you I was sick”). Alongside increased customization, an outlier emerged and, almost 30 years after its inception, went viral: headstone recipes.

The oldest example found so far dates to 1994 and features Christmas cookies; the trend spans over 20 burial monuments across the globe—from no-bake chocolate oatmeal cookies in Alaska and nut rolls in Israel to chicken soup in New York. The memorials all top the graves of women, signifying a reclamation of matrilineal legacies (a century prior, most were solely referred to as “wife of” on their headstones). They’re also a cross-cultural reflection of how we cook to comfort those in mourning, and a testament to food as a unifier in both celebratory and grief-stricken moments.

Researcher Rosie Grant first shined a spotlight on these unique epitaphs through her recreations of recipes from gravestones across America. The project, which began in 2022, has garnered over eight million likes via her TikTok account @GhostlyArchive. She sees the recipes as gifts that keep the deceased’s memory and heritage alive and conjure happy recollections of our own lost loved ones.<sup>1</sup>

In this way, our ancestors are no longer defined by a collection of fearful phrases chiseled into stone: Instead they pass down their culinary traditions before joining us at our kitchen tables, reminding us that life and death are the inseparable elements of a feast prepared by both the past and present.

(1) Another of Grant’s research interests includes limb graves, which are burial plots for amputated body parts. In some instances, the owner of the buried body part was never interred alongside their amputated limb.

## GRAVESTONE COOKIES

### On recipes to remember.



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## MURPHY’S LAW

### A musing on misfortune.

As with anything sufficiently universal, the origins of Murphy’s Law—which broadly states that anything that *can* go wrong—*will* go wrong—are disputed. No doubt people have been expressing something similar for as long as there has been language and our cave-dwelling ancestors were wondering why it always rained on their woolly mammoth barbecue. Still, we know that the Murphy bit was coined by an American aerospace engineer, Edward A. Murphy Jr., after a mishap during the testing of a rocket sled in the late 1940s. As he said: “If there are two or more ways to do something and one of those results in a catastrophe, then someone will do it that way.”

The inference—that there is human agency at work in the catastrophe—is subtly different from how Murphy’s Law is more commonly used, which has a more fatalistic sense. The classic example is that a piece of toast will always fall on the buttered side. In this vision, all human endeavor is a Sisyphian struggle against a universe that wants to ruin your breakfast.

There may be an element of pessimistic selection bias at work here: We remember the things that go wrong more clearly than those which pass without incident, and it’s

always more amusing to talk about disasters than triumphs. But various experiments have been performed to put Murphy’s Law to the test. One study concluded that a standard piece of toast, standardly buttered and dropped from a standard kitchen table, will tend to complete one rotation: Murphy’s Law turned into simple physics. Murphy’s Law also seems to echo the second law of thermodynamics, which says that entropy will always increase. No matter how organized you might be, a sock drawer will inevitably move toward disorder over time . . . and you *will* end up with mismatched socks.

If there is a lesson to be taken from Murphy’s Law and its cousins, such as Sod’s Law, it’s that a little humility and forgiveness never go amiss. In copyediting, there is Muphry’s Law, which states that if ever you criticize someone’s proofreading, you will make your own mistakes in the process. And of course, when things go wrong, it may not be through malice or incompetence, but simply a natural order asserting itself. As frustrating as Murphy’s Law can be to encounter (especially if you have a white carpet), it is ultimately proof of the fact that we are all in this together, doing our best as we travel through a cold and uncaring cosmos.

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