

NO Potato Salad

Last night I went to a neighborhood deli. A neighbor had told me that this particular deli sold a tasty Amish potato salad, and I wanted to try some. Behind the glass were a number of potato salads, with their little hand-written signs sticking up from the bowls. I didn't see a sign that read "Amish potato salad." They didn't have any last night. But I did see a sign for "NO Potato Salad."

Now when a man hankers after potato salad, he has to have potato salad, and when he's in an experimental mood, he might try a new potato salad. The salad in the bowl that said "NO Potato Salad" looked pretty good, so I asked what "NO" meant. The two people behind the counter cocked their heads at me, the way your dog does when you make a silly noise.

"Does it stand for New Orleans?" I asked.

"No," the woman said.

"What does it stand for?"

"It doesn't stand for anything. It means no."

It was my turn to cock my head like bemused dog.

"It's not potato salad," the man said. "That's what it means."

"It's not potato salad, but you call it *NO Potato Salad*?"

"That's right," the woman said.

"It looks like potato salad," said the man. "People mistake it for potato salad all the time."

The woman nodded. "That's why the sign says *NO Potato Salad*."

"And that doesn't confuse them?"

"I don't think so," the man said, "but it's true that no one's bought any of it."

"If it's not potato salad, then what is it?" I asked.

"It's made of broccoli," the woman said.

"So it's a broccoli salad, but you call it *NO Potato Salad*?"

"Yes. Don't you see? It *looks* like a potato salad, but it isn't."

"You tell your customers what it isn't, instead of telling them what it is?" I asked as reasonably as I could.

The man laughed. He was catching on. "Marge," the man said, "if the sign said *Broccoli Salad*, people would know it wasn't potato salad. I think that's his point."

"And if I came here looking for broccoli salad," I asked him, "how would I know you had some?"

"Good God," the man said, "I never thought of that. Who knows how many customers have come here looking for broccoli salad?" He chuckled and added, "We make things more complicated than they need to be sometimes, don't we?"

"You wrote it, George," Marge said testily.

So I didn't get any potato salad last night, but I did come away with what, to someone like me, is more satisfying: a cockeyed little example of why it's best to tell a reader what something is, as opposed to saying what it isn't.