Dining on Death Row: Last Meals and the Crutch of Ritual

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This essay examines last meal requests by those facing execution. After surveying food and beverage selections, I explore how culinary choices are marked by ethnicity, region, class, and gender, as well as inflected by memories, the longing for certain sensory experiences, and the intent to make a moral, political, or philosophical statement. I also consider which last suppers and comments have inspired movies, TV shows, musical compositions, and advertising; why the public desires information about the food requested by those facing death; how the condemned’s meals have become politicized, feeding arguments by both those for and those against the death penalty; what the origin of the last meal ritual is; and why the custom is perpetuated. Possessing varied meanings for different participants in the drama of execution, the ceremonial last meal is one of the most powerful symbolic elements within a larger phenomenon laden with rituals and symbols.

Keywords
AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus: Food preferences, correctional personnel, death row inmates, capital punishment, comfort foods

A fascination with the final meals of condemned inmates pervades American popular culture and consciousness. News articles concerning those just executed often mention final repasts. Several books on the subject have appeared over the past dozen years, such as Last Suppers (Treadwell and Vernon 2001), Last Meal (Black 2003), Meals to Die For (Price 2004b), and Their Last Suppers (Caldwell 2010). For $20, the maximum cost of a final meal permitted by several states, a Canadian company called Last Meals Delivery Service will provide clients in Toronto “a replica of the ‘last meal’ consumed by someone executed in the United States” (http://pauljkneale.com/last meals.html; website is no longer accessible). Since 2003, the highly popular weblog Dead Man Eating (http://deadmaneating.blogspot.com/) has posted end-of-life meals in prisons throughout the United States. Numerous websites list the more extravagant orders; some bloggers also ask readers to ponder: What would you request as your last meal?

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Few scholarly works, though, consider final repasts. They are limited to an article dwelling on theories of penology (LaChance 2007), a paper on the Internet regarding the meaning of execution that focuses more on last words than last meals (Meyer 2008), a student report concerning the media’s attention to end-of-life meals (Jeung 2009), an unpublished piece (Gordon 2006) discussing some of the moral issues about capital punishment raised by Bigert and Bergström’s film Last Supper (2005), a lengthy review of this film by folklorist LuAnne Roth (2011), and an article on the caloric content of last meals (Wansink, Kniffin, and Shimizu 2012).

Over the past half-century, folklorists have contributed extensively to foodways study beginning with the seminal work of Don Yoder at the University of Pennsylvania (Long 2009). Much of this literature deals with research methods (e.g., Anderson 1971; Camp 1978; Kalčík 1984; Long 1998; Rikoon 1982; Yoder 1972) and the traditions of various immigrant and ethnic groups, among them Italians (Cicala 1995; Magliocco 1993; Theophano 1991), Jews (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1986; Siporin 1994), and Pennsylvania Germans (Yoder 1961, 1962). Often employing fieldwork, folklorists have documented diverse regional customs and symbolism related to food, such as festivals and celebrations (Humphrey and Humphrey 1988), Cincinnati chili (Lloyd 1981), pasties in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (Lockwood and Lockwood 1991), clam-bakes in New England (Neustadt 1992), and crawfish consumption among Louisiana Cajuns (Gutierrez 1992). They have considered the role of commercially prepared foods in domestic rituals and routines, including Spam and ramen noodles (Kim and Livengood 1995) as well as Jell-O (Newton 1992), and they have investigated rumors of contamination of institutional and fast food (Fine 1980; Rich and Jacobs 1973; Turner 1987, 1993). Despite interest in a wide range of populations and settings, however, folklorists have largely overlooked eating behind bars, and particularly the last meals of prisoners about to be executed. Even the detailed ethnographic research of Bruce Jackson and Diane Christian among those on death row contains few references to food.1 For logistical, legal, and ethical reasons, the topic does not lend itself to interviewing and observing individuals taking their last bite of food as they confront that “existential precipice, the very end of life” (O’Neill 2001:1192). The absence of scholarship about dining on death row and unsuitability of fieldwork methods necessitate the use of other sources of information on the Internet and in media reports, biographies, and popular culture products in order to address a range of questions that will help delimit this area of inquiry, one that is no less compelling for its neglect in academe.

“When you lose so much of your freedom,” said the prisons operations manager for Oregon’s Department of Corrections, “things like food take on tremendous importance” (Rose 2005). Many desirable items are scarce or non-existent in prison. Meals are repetitive, hot food often arrives cold, and the quality of preparation depends on the skills of inmate cooks. Food costs are frequently trimmed by state legislators. In 2008, the average daily expense of feeding a Michigan prisoner was $2.48 (prison food costs accounted for 20 percent of the state’s general fund; see “Prison Food Service Costs” 2008). In 2005, California’s county jails allocated $2.25 per day per inmate, and the state prisons spent $2.45, while federal penitentiaries allotted $2.78 (Pringle 2005). The Oregon Department of Corrections managed to cut the cost from
$2.88 in 2001 to $2.30 by bargain hunting and bulk shopping (Rose 2005). Typically menus are established on a cycle of a month or six weeks, and then repeated ad nauseum. As Darris Adams, sentenced to life plus 14 years for kidnapping and carjacking, said about the food at New Folsom, a maximum security prison in Represa, California, “If I don’t eat, I don’t survive, but it’s not like I look forward to it. After so many years you get immune to it. You just swallow” (Pringle 2005).

In 2002, a row over the declining quality of sandwiches caused a deadly prison riot in England (Rose 2005). In mid-June 1960, 17 men on death row in San Quentin mounted a hunger strike demanding better meals. They complained that the food was cold, vegetables were watery, the desserts monotonous. They insisted on receiving steak, not roast beef, and some of the same items afforded those on the main line. The warden defended the menu, the irony in his remark probably unintended, stating that tamale pies, fried hominy, and meringue desserts were deliberately withheld from the condemned because “these things are fattening and the men do not get as much exercise as other prisoners” (Want Better Meals: Condemned Inmates1960:3-B). Improvement in conditions, including food, was a factor in the inmate riot in 1971 that took 43 lives at New York’s Attica prison (Bernstein 2010). Poor food service as well as allegations of food contaminated with hair balls, rocks, cardboard, bread ties, worms, and human feces precipitated a riot in Northpoint Training Center in central Kentucky in August 2009, causing a fiery melee and damage to six buildings (Schreiner 2010).

Given the importance of food in prison, particularly when a meal will be the last one, several questions arise. What food and beverage do inmates ask for as their final repast? To what extent and in what ways are culinary choices of prisoners marked by ethnicity, region, class, or gender as well as inflected by memories, the longing for certain sensory experiences, or the intent to make a moral, political, or philosophical statement? Why is there such widespread fascination by the general public with traditional last meals? How has the end-of-life meal become politicized and referred to in arguments by both those for and those against the death penalty? What are the origins of providing a special meal to the condemned? Why is the custom perpetuated? Addressing these questions contributes to the literature in folkloristics concerning several topics, such as marginalized groups, food customs, and the role of ritual and symbolism in people’s lives, particularly when they confront death.

A Feast before Dying

Food is never just something to eat.
—Margaret Visser (1986:12)

Texas has carried out the death sentence with the greatest zeal, accounting for about one-third of the executions since the death penalty resumed in 1976 (deathpenalty-info.org). Between December 7, 1982, and September 10, 2003, 245 of 310 Texas inmates on the eve of execution ordered special last meals. French fries headed the inventory of items at 48 percent of requests. At 35 percent, burgers were second in popularity, often cheeseburgers and frequently with double meat patties. Chicken, almost always deep fried, was included in 19 percent. Steak occurred in 18 percent
of orders. Ice cream, including shakes, appeared in 29 percent. Pie (usually pecan), cake (most often chocolate or white with white icing), cheesecake, peach cobbler, banana pudding (“with real bananas”), and cookies, cinnamon rolls, and doughnuts figured in 29 percent of orders. Seven inmates ordered multiple desserts. Sodas (typically Coke or Dr Pepper) were included in 30 percent of the requests. Although the last meal in Texas is served at 4 p.m., two hours before execution, 21 percent of the inmates ordered breakfast, mostly eggs, sausage (occasionally bacon, steak, or pork chops) and hash browns, sometimes with biscuits and gravy; the exception was one man who asked for two boxes of frosted flakes and a pint of milk.

Certain items turned up infrequently. Only 16 percent of meals contained salad, and 12 percent included milk. Other than deep fried potatoes and onion rings, vegetables were evident mainly by their absence, found in only 4 percent of meal requests; these included carrots, peas, green beans, cauliflower, broccoli with cheese topping, corn on the cob, and fried okra.

Many last-meal orders sought beverages, food, and preparations that rarely appear on prison menus. Milk tends to be available only at breakfast but not every day in some facilities; for instance, in 2010, Alabama cut milk from seven to three days and fruit from twice weekly to once, saving the state $700,000 a year (Reutter, Hunter, and Sample 2010). Water, an artificial fruit drink, or a beverage resembling Kool-Aid is provided at other meals. Casseroles, goulash, and soy-stretched chicken dishes are common on daily menus, with pudding or Jell-O for dessert (Grace 2003). In order to boost calories while cutting costs, meat is often extended through grinding and adding Textured Vegetable Protein. Increasingly, cold cuts are served at lunch, which cost Georgia three cents per inmate in 1999, netting the state a savings of $438,000 (Food Service Director 1999). In 2005, Michigan abolished coffee because it lacks nutritional value, and thereby reduced expenses by half a million dollars a year. Some prisons have banished fried foods, thus eliminating the cost of cooking fat, decreasing equipment maintenance costs, and lessening sewage and drain problems (Food Service Director 1999) as well as attempting to reduce medical expenses in a system with increasingly longer prison sentences and an aging population (Riell 2001). Meals have been trimmed in some prison systems from three to two on weekends and holidays, or to days when inmates are not working, a cutback that led to a dramatic increase in prisoner assaults in Georgia in 2009 (Reutter, Hunter, and Sample 2010).

An emphasis on sensory experiences, particularly in circumstances of deprivation, looms large in food choice among condemned prisoners who miss the taste and texture of savory fried chicken, juicy burgers, and sugar-laden pies, cakes, and sodas. Brian Price, an inmate at the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas, who prepared about two hundred last meals over a 10-year period, said he seasoned burgers with Worcestershire sauce, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. “[T]hen I’d grill the onions right there beside it and toast the buns with butter. I did the best I could with what I had and I’d always use fresh lettuce and tomato to garnish it with” (quoted in Hannaford 2004). Many orders were quite specific regarding number of items or manner of preparation; for instance, Toronto Patterson requested “[s]ix pieces of crispy fried chicken, four jalapeno peppers, four buttered buttermilk biscuits, chef salad (with bacon bits, black olives, ham, and
Italian dressing), six Sprites, and white cake with white icing,” while Frank McFarland specified a heaping portion of lettuce, a sliced tomato, a sliced cucumber, four celery stalks, four sticks of American or Cheddar cheese, two bananas and two cold half pints of milk. “He added that he wanted all the vegetables to be washed prior to serving, and that the cheese sticks be ‘clean’” (Price 2004b:235), whether out of fastidiousness or perhaps distrust of the kitchen. The first last meal that Price cooked was Lawrence Buxton’s request for steak, pineapple upside-down cake, tea, punch, and coffee. He was touched when the inmate sent word back about how much he enjoyed the meal: “I gave this guy a little bit of pleasure—just something to distract him for a brief moment before his execution. It’s a very humbling and emotional experience and I always prayed over each meal” (quoted in Hannaford 2004).

As indicated in a nationwide poll by Food & Wine magazine in 2003, a burger and fries—death row inmates’ most requested meal—is “the quintessential American food” (Shaw 2004), a reputation aided and abetted by the proliferation of fast food and chain restaurants. Tito Valdez, Jr., serving 25 years to life for conspiracy/solicitation to commit murder, said, “I remember the days when I could eat whatever I wanted: Denny’s Grand Slam for breakfast, a cold Subway pastrami sandwich for lunch, a juicy Carl's hamburger with crispy fries for dinner” (Valdez, n.d.). What he fondly recalled after being imprisoned for many years is what most inmates in Texas have ordered as a final meal.

A number of prisoners combined two, three, or even four types of meat in a meal order, and also asked for multiple sodas and pastries. If a single helping of meat, starch, and sweet represents the “normal” meal—for example, the burger, fries, and banana pudding given to Billy Woods at his behest, or the chili dogs, baked beans, corn, and peanut butter cookies served to Clifton Russell, Jr., who asked for whatever was on the menu for other prisoners that day—then 73 of 245 meals (30 percent) of Texas prisoners involved excessive amounts of food. Robert Drew, for instance, wanted “[s]teak (cooked rare), ham, two hamburgers, two pieces of fish and chocolate milk shake.” Kia Johnson specified “[f]our fried chicken breasts, onion rings, fried shrimp, French fries, fried catfish, double-meat cheeseburger with grilled onions, strawberry fruit juice, and pecan pie.” Hilton Crawford ordered “[t]welve beef ribs, three enchiladas, chicken fried steak with cream gravy, crisp bacon sandwich, ketchup, a loaf of bread, cobbler, three Cokes, three root beers, French fries, and onion rings.” Robert Lee Willie, an inmate in Louisiana who was macho to the end, amended his vow not to accept favors from prison officials, that is, “everything but fried seafood,” writes Prejean (1993:204). “He loves fried seafood.” A guard brought him trays of fried shrimp, oysters, and fish as well as a salad and fried potatoes, which he ate while handcuffed. “Robert . . . picks up a fried shrimp with his fingers, smells it with obvious delight, and eats. And eats and eats and talks and eats, and it is hard for me to realize that this is his last meal.” Several websites note that Thomas Grasso in Oklahoma sent for a dozen steamed clams, two dozen steamed mussels, six barbecued spareribs with sweet and sour sauce, a cheeseburger, a can of SpaghettiOs, a strawberry milk shake, and half a pumpkin pie. “I did not get my SpaghettiOs. I got spaghetti,” he complained. “I want the press to know this” (Campos 2003; Collins 2010;
Yglesias 1995). Grasso’s grievance and the orders for large amounts of fare, particularly meat and fried food, reveal further the importance of the sensory in regard to food selection.

Final meal requests, however, are subject to cost and availability restrictions, which vary: $20 in Texas and limited to what is maintained in the kitchen or butcher shop (never lobster, and not steak since 1993, according to Price 2004a), $40 in Florida using ingredients that are present locally, $40 in Indiana and the meal may be ordered from one of a half-dozen restaurants in town, and $50 in California. A prisoner on death row in San Quentin scheduled for execution in late fall asked for fresh strawberries. When told that “[w]e can’t get fresh strawberries in November,” the inmate replied “I’ll wait” (Shaw 2004). Sometimes the prison chaplain or other officials have bent the rules to provide inmates with items “from the free world” (Price 2004a), including fruit (Shaw 2004), Häagen-Dazs instead of ice cream from the commissary (Verhovek 1998), and a special sauce (Hickey 2001). On several occasions, writes inmate cook Brian Price (2004b:15), officials brought him food items to prepare that they had purchased: “Venison, liver, shrimp, bacon, fresh tomatoes, lettuce, and even a ‘blooming onion’ appeared suddenly on the day of execution.”

Because of restrictions, orders for large quantities of food may be pared down. Texas inmate David Allen Castillo requested 24 soft shell tacos; he received four. He also wanted six tostados, but was given two; two cheeseburgers, which were refused him; and two whole onions, five jalapenos, one chocolate shake, and a quart of milk, which were granted (Price 2004a). Substitutions occur. When Pedro Muniz in Texas asked for salad and shrimp, which were not available, he received a cheeseburger, fries, and cola. If nothing particular is requested, then a Georgia inmate is served steak and eggs, while a Texas prisoner is provided with whatever is scheduled that day for the general prison population (Hickey 2001). The “Final Meal Requests” link on the website of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice issues the caveat that “[t]he final meal requested may not reflect the actual meal served,” something overlooked or ignored by many who utilize food choice as a basis for pro-death penalty sentiments. Even Brian Price (2004a), who prepared last meals for a decade, said he initially assumed that a death row prisoner received what he ordered.

A second factor of social class based on education and income likely has salience in explaining meal selection. An examination of 196 bios of prisoners executed in Texas reveals that 21 individuals (11 percent) had seven years or less of schooling, 50 (26 percent) made it through middle school, 30 (15 percent) graduated from high school, 17 (9 percent) had some junior college experience, five (2.6 percent) went to a four-year college but not all graduated, and the largest number at 68 (35 percent) dropped out of school in the 10th or 11th grade, that is, by age 16 when they were no longer legally compelled to attend. Two-thirds (135) committed murder for financial gain, or in some fashion benefited materially. Often amounts seem paltry: $250 from a feed and farm supply; $140 from a laundry; a pistol, purse, and $8 from a home; a $2.70 six-pack of beer from a store clerk (Price 2004b:311, 320, 337; Serrill 1983). Given their underprivileged backgrounds and underclass status, they likely chose the kind of food as a last meal—burgers, french fries, fried chicken—that had been readily obtainable and familiar before incarceration. Moreover,
steak, lobster, and shrimp have long been considered prestige or luxury items owing to price, and they are certainly not part of ordinary prison fare, which probably accounts for their presence in many last meal requests.

In addition to certain sensory qualities and the possible impact of social class, food choice sometimes is influenced by ethnicity and regional upbringing. Of 245 meal requests in Texas, 16 were for tacos, burritos, quesadillas, enchiladas, or simply “Mexican platter” or “Mexican lunch,” five inmates asked for tortillas with their meal, and 28 specified the addition of jalapenos, picante sauce, salsa, red pepper, or chili powder to their food. Not all of these prisoners bore a Latino identity, but many grew up in Texas, and hence were familiar with these foods and condiments and their flavor principles (Rozin 1982). The five requests for chicken fried steak, usually with “country gravy” or “white gravy,” two for fried okra, two others for a “big bowl of grits,” nine for barbecued beef, ribs, or chicken, one for mustard greens and spiced beets, and another for “½ pound of chitterlings” likewise indicate regional influence from different areas of the South.

According to one reporter (Hannaford 2004), Brian Price, who prepared last meals, “says inmates generally choose food unique to their culture. Mexican guys want Mexican food. The black guys generally want everything from ‘chitlins’ [stuffed pig intestines] to fried chicken and watermelon.” Actual counts of the 187 last meals that he prepared indicate that this might be overstated (of the 212 inmates he identifies, 17 Caucasians, 17 African Americans, and eight Latinos declined a final serving of food). Among the 57 African Americans requesting a final meal, only four asked for something that can be construed as “soul” food, of which barely one fits the stereotype: “½ pound of chitterlings, fried chicken (dark meat), 10 slices of bacon, 1 raw onion, fried shrimp, peach cobbler, 1 pitcher of whole milk” (the inmate was not served the chitterlings, however: Price 2004b:309). Twenty-one blacks asked for burgers, steak, or chicken—much like their white counterparts—nine requested other foods, two wanted fajitas or enchiladas, and three specified hot sauce, a bowl of chili, or jalapeno peppers as part of their meal. Of the 23 Latinos, three stipulated Mexican cuisine exclusively. Seven other Latinos specified meals consisting of both Mexican and American foods, two preferred only ice cream, one wanted venison steak, and one indicated shrimp but was given a cheeseburger instead. Just one person requested watermelon, a Latino. The lone Asian, born in South Vietnam and raised in Texas, ordered steak, french fries, beans, and water. Perhaps more than ethnicity, the data indicate that regional association or upbringing in a particular geographical area affects food choice.

Dietary restrictions owing to religious beliefs and practices seem to have played no part in last-meal requests, at least not in Texas. Is gender a factor? In provisioning mythology, red meat is masculine while the more delicate chicken and fish, along with fruit, vegetables, and salad, tend toward the feminine. Males select fried food; females prefer baked. Men eat heartily; women daintily (Adler 1981; Fakazis 2011; Heisley 1990; Jones 2007). While they account for 10 percent of murder arrests, only 1 percent of women have been executed since capital punishment resumed (deathpenaltyinfo.org). Hence, gender disparities in the criminal justice system (along with racial inequalities) make comparing male and female food preference somewhat problematic.
Of the dozen women executed in seven states since 1976, seven declined a final meal (Allen, Barfield, Beets, Block, Newton, Plantz, Wuornos), but one of these women (Barfield) did have a bag of Cheez Doodles and a soft drink, and another (Wuornos) was given a cup of coffee and ate some snack food (for particulars, see http://deathpenaltyinfo.org/women-and-death-penalty). One moderate meal was for salad, pickled okra, pizza, strawberry shortcake, and cherry limeade (Riggs), and another consisted of sweet peas, fried chicken, Dr Pepper, and apple pie (Lewis). Two other selections epitomized feminine food preference: Buenoano requested steamed broccoli and asparagus salad, strawberries, and a cup of tea, and Tucker asked for a banana, peach, and garden salad with ranch dressing, which she did not eat (Hannaford 2004). In contrast, Lois Nadean Smith—who earned the sobriquet in high school of “Mean Nadean” (“Oklahoma Executes Third Woman” 2001)—stipulated barbecued ribs, onion rings, strawberry banana cake, and cherry lemonade.

In sum, 58 percent of the 12 women in the United States, including three in Texas, declined a meal, in contrast to 21 percent of men in Texas, one woman demanded a masculine plate of barbecued ribs and fried onion rings, and four women (33 percent) preferred restrained servings of mainly feminine cuisine. More than 90 percent of these 12 women, then, chose nothing or female foods in moderate amounts, in contrast to men in Texas who ordered substantial portions of meat and fried food but little fruit, salad, or fresh vegetables. (A mere 12 of 243 men requested meals without red meat; seven orders were for fruit, salad, and/or vegetables, while five others involved fish, eggs, and/or cheese.) Studies of “comfort food” preferences, often selected during times of stress, suggest that men tend to choose foods that are whole meals and such items as steak, casseroles, and soup, in contrast to women who often opt for salads, fruit, and snack food. The male choices possess a nostalgic quality associated with meals prepared by others in their youth, while the female selections exhibit convenience, indulgence, and perhaps in some instances an implicit rejection of the traditional role of homemaker (Locher et al. 2005; Wansink, Cheney, and Chan 2003).

Several inmates, both male and female, asked for only a beverage such as Coke, freshly squeezed orange juice, or coffee. Perhaps because of anxiety, others nibbled on snack food, ate sparingly, or requested little: an apple, a plain cheese sandwich, a flour tortilla, and water. John Ramos, on death row until the Florida Supreme Court reversed the conviction, said, “I thought about my last meal. . . . I was gonna tell them, ‘Just feed me the same s——. It’s disgusting of you to offer me the best food when I’m gonna puke it back in your face’” (quoted in Freedberg 1999). According to a death-watch log, at 11:50 a.m. on Sunday, three days before his execution in Arkansas, Earl Van Denton refused to order a last meal. At 4:46 a.m. on Monday, he refused breakfast. At 8:37 p.m., Tuesday, “Denton got up and vomited in [sic] commode.” At 2:02 a.m. on Wednesday, execution day, he vomited, and again at 10:17 that morning. At 3:00 p.m., last meals were served to the other two prisoners to be executed that night; despite the prison nurse’s urging, Denton took no food (Kuntz 1997). Since 1995, a condemned prisoner in Indiana is served a “special meal,” as it is called (Hickey 2001), at least two days before the execution because many inmates told officials they were not hungry in the 24 hours before their death; on the last day they are given regular prison fare (VanSickle 2003). Hence, when Joseph Trueblood in Indiana refused a
special last meal as a means of “protesting what the state is getting ready to do,” he was given the same dinner as other inmates: a bologna sandwich, a cheese sandwich, fruit and cookies, which he did not eat (Tan 2003; VanSickle 2003).

Do most of the condemned consume their last meal? The jury is still out. Several prison spokespersons contend that inmates eat a good part of their final meal—including the steak they have to saw through with plastic knives or that is pre-cut and eaten with a plastic spoon or “spork” (see reports in Hickey 2001; Poltilove 2009; and Verhovek 1998). Other accounts indicate that while a few eat heartily, most do not. McClary (2007) writes: “On Thursday evening, however, [Claude H.] Ryan was so nervous he couldn’t eat his last meal and, as his final hour approached, he suffered a near breakdown. He refused all religious rites, but asked Reverend Arvid C. Ohrnell, the prison chaplain, to accompany him to the gallows.” In addition, Crowder (2004) informs readers that “[p]rison officials described [David Kevin] Hocker as antsy but upbeat the day of his death. He asked a lot of questions about the execution procedure and talked about his religious beliefs. Hocker had no breakfast or lunch Thursday. He requested a last meal of frankfurters, French fries, American cheese and chocolate cake, but he did not eat it, prison spokesman Brian Corbett said.” At least four in Texas (Derrick, Kelly, Jernigan, and Tucker) ordered final meals, but once they were delivered, declined to eat them. In the documentary film Last Supper, a former prison warden from Bangkok, Thailand, explains that, in the words of the film’s reviewer (Roth 2011:107), “the last supper is often not consumed by the condemned, who is too nervous to eat. Instead it is given to Buddhist monks as an offering.” Wilbert Rideau, in prison for 44 years after stabbing a woman to death, contends that a prisoner’s last meal is often ordered for and eaten by his friends: “Condemned men usually lost their appetites” (quoted in Garner 2010). “I wouldn’t be able to eat,” said former warden Donald Cabana, “and I’ve never seen very many who do except to push the food around” (quoted in Dow 2002:188–9). Finally, Robert Johnson in Death Work (1990:91) maintains that most prisoners “eat little or nothing at all.” He quotes an officer who said that “[f]ood is the last thing they got on their minds.” Johnson also described to a reporter his having watched a condemned man kneel in his cell, the Styrofoam container on his bed, and attempt to eat the steak he had requested: “He ate a bite or two, and that was it.” The last meal, noted Johnson, is usually ordered the day before execution when the condemned still harbor the hope of reprieve; by the time the meal arrives, however, “your appetite goes with your hope” (“Last Meal” 1991).

In sum, it would appear that a number of prisoners consume part of the meal while others order nothing or eat nothing they ordered. Yet other inmates request hearty meals, even inordinate amounts of food. There seems to be no general trend, however, no direct correlation between size of meal and kinds of food ordered on the one hand, and on the other, expressions of remorse, insistence on innocence, unbridled contentiousness, or manifestations of bravado.

A few prisoners have utilized the occasion to make political or moral statements. In North Carolina, Ricky Lee Sanderson explained: “I didn’t take [the last meal] because I have very strong convictions about abortion and the 33 million babies that have been aborted in this country. Those babies never got a first meal and that’s why I didn’t take the last in their memory” (“Last Words on Death Row” 2007). On the
card for setting forth the final meal request, one inmate in Texas wrote “Justice, Temperance, with Mercy.” Another penciled “God’s saving grace, love, truth, peace and freedom.” A third indicated “Justice, Equality, World Peace.” Lawrence Russell Brewer, a white supremacist gang member executed on September 21, 2011, for chaining an African American man to the back of a pickup truck and dragging him to his death, asked for an enormous meal of steaks, triple bacon cheeseburger, barbecued meat, omelet, pizza, fried okra, ice cream, fudge, and root beer. He did not eat any of whatever food he actually received (Graczyk 2011; Oremus 2011; Reuters 2011). An outraged state legislator said that the Texas inmate had ordered the meal in an attempt to “make a mockery out of the process” (Fernandez 2011), that is, he exploited the meal request as a subversive act. In Tennessee, Philip Workman asked that his final meal be a vegetarian pizza donated to any homeless person near the prison. The state refused. A local woman called friends; together they bought 150 pizzas for $1,200, which were delivered to a rescue mission. “I just felt like I had to do something positive,” she said. The president of the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) added another 15 veggie pies, and a Minneapolis radio station sent 17 pizzas to a center that helps teens in crisis (Fantz 2007).

“Some of the condemned prefer to fast,” observes the inmate cook Brian Price (2004b:21). “Others order favorite foods from their childhood, recalling happier times to somewhat comfort themselves.” This is the final factor in food choice, likely the most important one and implied in the previous discussion of other influences. An account on the Prison Talk blog conveys the sense of comfort and past memories that food may conjure up for prisoners. Bookgirl writes (June 7, 2002) that at Christmas she took her husband some homemade biscuits, “not because I can bake good biscuits but because he asked me to try. They turned out . . . different.” He shared his Christmas food with others who had received none, including an elderly man with no teeth who consumed nothing but the biscuits. No one else liked them. Asked if he thought they were good, the man replied: “Every morning when I was a little boy, my mama baked biscuits for breakfast. When I came to prison, she still baked biscuits for me every Christmas. My mama died a few years ago, and I ain’t had any homemade biscuits since then. Your wife’s biscuits taste just like my mama’s—God rest her soul, that woman never could bake a decent biscuit! They taste awful, but they remind me of my mama.” Concludes Bookgirl: “That’s the sweetest insult I’ve ever had.”

In My Last Supper (Dunea 2007), photographer Melanie Dunea asked 50 of the world’s top chefs what they would have for their final meal. The majority described simple foods: scrambled eggs, a cheeseburger, and a steak; a tuna sandwich with bacon, a Krispy Kreme doughnut, and a Corona beer; or just fried chicken, a hot dog, or a big bowl of spaghetti. One picked a roast, reminiscing to the book’s reviewer (Stein 2007) about his family’s Sunday lunch in Scotland when he was growing up. The reviewer writes that “when it comes to our deepest desires, it turns out that food isn’t just about taste. It’s tied right into memory and the longing for the sensations of when we felt happiest or most loved.” He quotes a restaurant owner: “If someone can hand us those memories . . . it’s the culinary equivalent of a big hug.” Another chef remarked about answers to the question of last meal: “There’s always a return to childhood. . . . The word Mom comes up at least a third of the time” (Stein 2007). Texas inmate Kenneth Gentry asked for a final meal of a bowl of butter beans in
addition to biscuits, mashed potatoes, onions, tomatoes, chocolate cake, and Dr Pepper with ice. The lima beans, said Brian Price, are “difficult to prepare, but it was something his mum made him when he was a kid and I knew it would take him back to a time when it was peaceful. So I cooked them real slow” (quoted in Hannaford 2004; see also Price 2004b:41). “No food can ever mean as much to you as that food [which you grew up with],” writes John Lancaster in The New Yorker (2011:68). It is comfort food, “designed to remind us of familiar things, to connect us with our personal histories and our communities and our families. That has always been true and it always will be true.”

Only the notion of physical and emotional comfort as well as pleasant memories triggered by the taste, texture, aroma, and mouth feel of food can account for the overwhelming presence of cakes and pie and ice cream and milk shakes in so many final repasts, or breakfast served late afternoon a couple of hours before execution. How else to explain an order for “an old-fashioned cheeseburger,” smothered chicken and rice, Cool Whip and cherries, “one cup of hot tea (from tea bags) and six chocolate chip cookies,” a birthday cake, a strawberry shake and cheesecake, a meal topped off with bubble gum, salmon croquettes with scrambled eggs and biscuits, a bag of Jolly Ranchers candy, or even liver and onions? Indiana granted a death-row inmate’s last request for his mother to be allowed to prepare his two favorite meals, which she cooked on-site with ingredients provided by the prison and then shared with her inmate son and several other relatives as well as his spiritual adviser (Hickey 2001). The comforting physical sensations of warm, easily eaten, filling foods and the emotional association of food with particular individuals and pleasurable events provide relief of distress for many inmates facing their execution; this factor dominates in explaining culinary selection among the condemned.4

**Food, Crimes, and Symbols**

Like an additional flavor, meanings are carried with food.

—David Mas Masumoto (1987:113)

The public has long been attracted to executions as well as inquisitive about the crimes and final actions of condemned prisoners. From the Middle Ages onward, executions were popular amusements attended by hundreds, sometimes thousands, in all ranks of society. Reasons varied, including perhaps the satisfaction of witnessing the restoration of law and order through ritualized retribution, catharsis in escaping from resentful or deprived lives, feelings of pleasure in the excitement of being in a crowd, morbid curiosity, sympathy with the condemned, or the need for strategies of defense against the fear of death (Banner 2000; Gatrell 1994; Johnson 1990; McLynn 1989). As the barrister, inveterate diarist, and frequent execution watcher James Boswell (1740–95) wrote about his “impulse to be present at every execution”: “I can account for this curiosity in a philosophical manner, when I consider that death is the most awful [sic] object before every man, whoever directs his thoughts seriously towards futurity” (quoted in McLynn 1989:268).

England banned public executions in 1868, and they ceased in America by the 1930s. The lives and deaths of criminals continue to intrigue, however, as evident in
the mass media. Known as the “pick-ax murderer” whose conversion to Christianity gained worldwide publicity, Karla Faye Tucker is celebrated in song by four bands in addition to being the subject of two plays, several documentaries, and an interview on Larry King Live as well as inspiring the movies Last Dance (1996) and Crossed Over (2002). Aileen Wuornos has had two documentary films, one comic book, a song, an opera, and a movie about her (Kassab 2002; KRT 2002; Word 2002). Charlize Theron won a Golden Globe and an Academy Award Oscar for her portrayal in Monster (2003), said to be based on the life of Wuornos, a Daytona Beach prostitute who became a serial killer. Eating Krispy Kreme donuts helped the actress gain 30 pounds for her role (Stossel 2004). Convicted of robbing and murdering a gas station attendant one night and a motel manager the next evening, 32-year-old Gary Gilmore was executed by firing squad in Utah, a method that he chose. His last meal consisted of steak, potatoes, milk, and coffee although he consumed only the beverages along with contraband whiskey. His last request was for his eyes to be used for transplants (two people received corneas). His last words: “Let’s do it!” (see Ramsland, n.d.). Norman Mailer won a Pulitzer Prize for The Executioner’s Song based on Gilmore’s story, and Tommy Lee Jones garnered an Emmy for his portrayal of Gilmore in a television movie. Five weeks before his execution, the cast of Saturday Night Live sang a medley of Christmas songs with altered lyrics entitled “Let’s Kill Gary Gilmore for Christmas” (snltranscripts.jt.org). Playboy published a lengthy interview with him that appeared shortly after his death. He is celebrated in song by two musical groups, The Adverts and The Police. In a Seinfeld episode, Jerry finally decides to buy a particular jacket and says to Elaine: “Well, in the immortal words of Gary Gilmore, ‘Let’s do it.’” Dan Wieden, one of the founders of the ad agency for Nike, credits the inspiration for his “Just Do It” to “Let’s do it” (Greene 2010).

A last supper industry has emerged, replete with official and unofficial websites reporting final meal requests and last words, displaying a last meals trivia game, and offering Dead Man Eating T-shirts, underwear, and coffee mugs. Why does the public hunger for information about prisoners’ last meals? In papers and print, pundits refer to a “morbidly curious public,” “voyeuristic fascination,” and “macabre enjoyment,” but never quite answer the question. Clues to understanding the intrigue about last meals, over and above initial curiosity, lie just beneath the surface of comments on blog sites. Many contributors immediately jump from describing a condemned prisoner’s end-of-life meal request to wondering aloud what they (or you) would ask for in such a situation. It brings to mind Robert Alton Harris’s final remark (he was executed in California’s gas chamber on April 21, 1992), paraphrasing from the movie Bill & Ted’s Bogus Journey (1991), that “[y]ou can be a king or a street sweeper, but everyone dances with the Grim Reaper.” Reminded of their mortality, the chat room writers describe end-of-life meals for themselves consisting of luxury items—often in great abundance—or comfort food, and sometimes repasts composed of both, similar to what condemned inmates have requested. Or they postulate being too anxious about their impending demise to order anything, again like many of those who faced their imminent death.

Another reason for the preoccupation with last meals is puzzlement over the character of the condemned as perhaps manifested through meal selection. “Do last meal menus somehow shed light on the inner psyche of the condemned man himself?”
ask two compilers of last meals and words (Treadwell and Vernon 2001). Does “the last meal gives us a glimpse into the darkest recesses of the human mind?” inquires a blogger (Vogel, n.d.). In a word, no.

Based on records combining last words and last meals of 237 inmates executed in Texas over 11 years, it appears that nearly half of the prisoners requested a meal of normal size, while one-fourth asked for disproportionate amounts of food and the other fourth wanted little or nothing. Thirty-three percent expressed remorse, of whom the largest number (44 percent) specified a normal meal. The remarks of 39 percent of the inmates indicated resignation to their fate; slightly more than half (53 percent) asked for meals of normal size. Of the 13 percent insisting in their final statements on their innocence, the largest number either requested little or nothing to eat (41 percent), or a normal meal (35 percent). The three men confronting imminent death with bravado—“dying game”—specified normal, not excessive meals. Of the three contemptuous prisoners issuing barbed statements (“Kiss my proud Irish ass”; “the prosecutor and Bill Scott are sorry sons of bitches”), two wanted normal measures of food, and one sought a meal of disproportionate size. In daily life, food choices frequently are utilized, consciously or not, to define people, places, and events and as a basis for assessing others (Jones 2007). When it comes to the last meal prior to execution, though, little can be inferred about character, guilt, or innocence from the final repast owing to the circumstances, that is, years of deprivation of certain foods and their preparations, anxiety, and the desire for solace offered by “comfort food” and the memories evoked.

Last meals and the items in them serve as symbols in the discourse on crime and punishment. Jacquelyn C. Black created photographs of inmates’ final repasts juxtaposed with each individual’s photo, last statement, and other information. She writes (2003) that in 1984, she read a news article about Velma Barfield whose final meal before execution consisted of Cheez Doodles and a Pepsi. “That image stayed with me and years later became the impetus for educating myself about capital punishment” (Black, quoted in a review of Last Meal, in Contemporary Justice Review 8:337), which she now opposes. Those contesting retributive justice, particularly in regard to the mentally handicapped, sometimes start or end an essay with reference to a meal request. One frequently mentioned is that of Johnny Paul Penry with an IQ less than 60 who, on hearing of his second last-minute stay of execution, asked if he could still eat his “last” meal—cheeseburgers and french fries (Hellerstein 1997; Orecklin 2000). Rickey Ray Rector has been cited by both advocates and opponents of the death penalty, albeit at cross-purposes. After shooting a police officer, he attempted to commit suicide but succeeded only in inflicting severe brain damage, thereby becoming so mentally disabled he did not know what an execution was. For his final meal he requested steak, fried chicken, cherry Kool-Aid, and pecan pie. He left the pecan pie on the side of the tray, however, telling the guards who came to take him to the execution chamber that he was saving it “for later” (Mansnerus 2001). One blogger writes about seemingly aberrant last meals and eating behavior that “[t]he obvious joke here is that you can’t look at some of these requests and not know these guys are retarded” (Reynolds 2010). In contrast, an attorney representing a mentally disabled man on death row titles her op-ed piece “What Do We Gain By Taking These Childlike Lives?” (Hellerstein 1997), and an editorial in the Dallas Morning News (Novem-
ber 22, 1998) concerning Penry and Rector is called “Executing Mentally Impaired Prisoners Is Unjust and Cruel.” (In June 2002, the US Supreme Court ruled that the execution of mentally disabled people is unconstitutional, violating the Eighth Amendment.)

One trope found in remarks by proponents of the death penalty is the construction of the offender as a “monster.” Extravagant food requests or enormous amounts of food—monstrous portions—represent the unfettered appetites of condemned inmates, a lack of restraint also manifested in their crimes and inherent in their character. As the coup de grâce, several justify their position by noting that prisoners on death row for killing people “didn’t give their victims a last meal of their choice”; one even titles his article “They Didn’t Get to Choose Their Last Meals” (Greene 2001). White supremacist Lawrence Russell Brewer requested a last meal of great quantities of meat, sweets, and soft drinks but ate nothing of what was served him in ridicule of the custom. A state legislator who chairs the Senate Criminal Justice Committee demanded an immediate end to the tradition of providing a special end-of-life meal (Graczyk 2011; Oremus 2011). “He never gave his victim an opportunity for a last meal,” said Senator John Whitmire. “Why in the world are you going to treat him like a celebrity two hours before you execute him? It’s wrong to treat a vicious murderer in this fashion. Let him eat the same meal on the chow line as the others” (quoted in Fernandez 2011).

The custom nevertheless continues in most states, perhaps not surprisingly given food’s significance as daily sustenance and its symbolic import. Ancient Egyptians included it for entombed royalty along with other necessities and comforts in the afterlife, adherents of a host of religions from Buddhism to Catholicism to Lucumí offer food and beverage to spirits and saints as a sign of respect and supplication or to seek favors, and some families host a picnic in the cemetery once a year with gifts of food for the deceased. Widely spread, the post-burial practice of providing a funeral meal at a reception, usually in the home of the deceased’s survivors, focuses on the needs of the living: “Take time to stuff, O mourner. Full stomachs cannot cry” (from a poem by Jeanne Nail Adams, quoted in Yoder 1986:149).

The origins of a final repast are elusive, however. Sacrificial and scapegoating rituals in ancient Greece during calamities or in efforts to avert a future catastrophe sometimes involved selecting a criminal, poor man, or other marginal individual to be chased out of the city or even killed. The victim was treated to special food or an excellent repast in order to make this stand-in for the community appear to be a more valuable and representative member (Bremmer 1983). In Rome on the eve of entering the arena, gladiators and bestiarii, those who fought against wild beasts, received an elegant dinner—the *cena libera*—provided by the host of the show as symbolic compensation to those about to die, subsequently developed into a spectacle for public titillation. The Romans considered gladiatorial contests to have developed from human sacrifice to propitiate the souls of the dead; rather than kill free and noble members of society, prisoners or slaves were chosen, but they had to be made to appear higher in status—one means of which was to extend a special meal (Brettler and Poliakoff 1990). In Nuremberg in the late 1500s, the condemned “was allowed a liberal table, provided by charitable people” (not by the state) three days before execution (Calvert 1928:36). In England, some prisoners with funds, such as John Rann
and Renwick Williams who were executed in the late eighteenth century, hosted their own dinner party in prison on the eve of hanging (Gatrell 1994; Johnson 1990; Smith 1996). Other condemned inmates had only bread, water, and gruel, or were even starved. Following an execution, the prison warden might schedule an official repast as closing ceremony: “We hang at eight, breakfast at nine” read one invitation (Johnson 1990:12).

By the late nineteenth century in America, the provision of a distinctive end-of-life meal for the condemned was a firmly established tradition. The custom was well enough known that on December 9, 1891, The Roanoke Times could print the following joke:6

“The Design Frustrated”

WARDEN: Now you can select anything you like for your last meal before execution.
CONVICTED MURDERER: All right. Send in a New England boiled dinner.
WARDEN: No you don’t. I can’t let you cheat the law by committing suicide.

Newspaper reportage of execution rituals was so pervasive that on September 13, 1891, the Fort Worth Gazette published the following editorial:

Some day some newspaper will forget to report the articles of food comprising the last meal eaten by a murderer under sentence of death and then the whole bottom will fall out of newspaper enterprise. It is terrible to contemplate the fearful results that might ensue were the public allowed to remain in ignorance whether a murderer, just before going to the scaffold, ate beef-steak or chicken, or whether he drank tea or coffee. There is too much attention paid to sickly details in setting forth the fact of the execution of a man too dangerous to live.

In The Washington Times [DC] on February 13, 1903, an anonymous author reports on the sale of relics from the infamous Newgate prison in England, then segues to the remark that “[y]ou are familiar with the nature of the breakfast often prepared in this country [the United States] by the sheriff’s wife as the last meal of the condemned: coffee, rolls, chops, eggs.” The writer concludes that “[t]here is a strange fascination in the accounts of executions.”

The Crutch of Ritual

Only the ritual of an execution makes it possible to endure. Without it the condemned could not give the expected measure of cooperation to the etiquette of dying. Without it, we who must preside at their deaths could not face the morning of each new execution day. Nor could you.

—Byron Eshelman, former death row chaplain at San Quentin Prison (quoted in Canan 1989:75)

At the beginning of their film Last Supper, Bigert and Bergström call attention to a “paradoxical ritual” in modern executions, that “human mercy and cruelty . . . share the same dinner table.” Like the filmmakers, several commentators have puzzled over this, taking divergent, even contradictory, stances. Karon (2000) suggests that provid-
ing a special last meal might be “to sugarcoat what remains a grim act of violence by the state [executing the criminal] to redress a previous wrong.” Focusing on the bureaucratization and routinization of the “new penology” that dehumanizes prisoners turning them into docile automatons, LaChance (2007) contends that the state allows the condemned to choose whatever they wish for a final meal and to speak freely before dying in order to demonstrate that they possess autonomy and agency; as volitional beings who committed heinous crimes of their own free will, they deserve the punishment meted out to them. To sustain the emotional satisfaction required to uphold the death penalty, “[t]he state turns its offenders into self-made monsters” (LaChance 2007:719). In contrast to this interpretation, Gordon (2006) proposes that the ritual of the last meal constitutes “both an implicit call for forgiveness on the part of the citizens of the state” and “a demonstration of forgiveness as well, in that it shows kindness to the condemned and a recognition of their humanity and our shared humanity.”

“I always thought of the last meals I prepared as a version of the Last Supper, when Christ knew that he would die the next day,” said prison cook Brian Price (2004a). Some abolitionists of the death penalty draw upon the Crucifixion in pleading for “mercy, forgiveness, and respect for the dignity of life” (Lynch 2000:23), while retentionists, calling for retribution, often invoke the “eye for an eye, life for life” passage in Mosaic Law in Exodus 21:22–5. The situation is complicated by the diversity of roles, actors, and scripts in the performance of executions, beginning with the prisoners and the kitchen staff.

A number of inmates have found the offer of a special meal offensive, such as a prisoner described by Johnson (1990:106) who “was horrified by the last-meal ritual, which struck him as barbaric and cruel.” On the other hand, before dying, Lawrence Buxton sent word to Texas prison cook Brian Price thanking him for his meal. Patrick Sonnier in Louisiana remarked: “Warden, tell that chef, tell him for me that he did a really great job. . . . And you tell him, Warden . . . that I am truly, truly appreciative.” Warden Maggio, who earlier had said that the cook was giving “real special attention” to the meal, told Patrick: “He put himself out for you, Sonnier, he really did” (Prejean 1993:87). Brian Price, who associated the prisoner’s last meal with the Lord’s Supper, commented that “I took my job seriously, and it made me feel good that I was able to give the condemned at least a piece of a free world as they remembered it.” He continued: “The meal requests were rarely complicated; many prisoners ordered food that they had eaten as children. I think that through their meals, they were seeking a small bit of comfort and courtesy. Food can take you back to a better time in your life, and it gave me comfort to give these dying men and women some comfort in their last hours” (Price 2004a).

Other participants in the drama of execution include the warden and the execution team, while members of the public, for whom capital punishment is an abstract symbol (Banner 2002), make inferences from the little information reported by the media. Former warden Donald Cabana maintains that the last meal is a welcome distraction in having to cope with putting someone to death. “I think you’d feel somewhat naked walking out and there was no last meal issue to talk about. Even if he doesn’t want a last meal, you still have to talk to him about that. . . . That takes time away from think-
ing” (quoted in Dow 2002:189). During the final five or six hours, two officers are required to distract and comfort the prisoner as part of the task of “getting the man dead” (Johnson 1990:90). This includes a steady stream of conversation and even eating with him. “Shoot, one ‘em actually asked what to order and we didn’t know what to order so we ordered McDonald’s food for ‘im. He ate Big Macs and I ate Big Macs, you know” (Johnson 1990:90). Given the ambivalence over the death penalty in the United States (Bonnie 1990; Dubber 1996; Lynch 2000), members of the public either develop a sympathetic identification with prisoners by recognizing their common humanity through eating and coming to terms with death (LaChance 2007:702), or they infer that “monstrous” meal portions represent an uncontrollable, monstrous character justifying death for the safety of all (see, e.g., statements on lawfreefaq.com).

In commenting on the etiquette of dying and the ritual of execution, former death row chaplain Byron Eshelman remarked that “[n]o matter how you think you feel about capital punishment, no matter how you imagine you would face the legal giving or taking of life, you would meet the reality of it by holding tightly to the crutch of ritual” (Canan 1989:75). One scholar asks: “What purpose does all this routinization and ceremony serve?” The answer, he says, lies in the “loss of tolerance for suffering,” and hence the need for a “carefully groomed image of humaneness”: “[T]he modern orchestration of death lends assurance that everything is in order, everything is humane and civilized and that we aren’t, after all, barbarians” (Haines 1992:126).

When executions in America were carried out in small towns and rural areas before the advent of a centralized state prison, the condemned and the local sheriff were in close contact. Not surprisingly the prisoner’s last meal became transformed into a special one before dying. To extend food to another is a profoundly human act, a kindness that symbolically acknowledges a shared humanity. Whether the offer of food was intended as hospitality, a method of calming the prisoner, or a coping mechanism helping relieve the officer of stress or guilt, the fact remains that by the late nineteenth century, the tradition of a custom meal was firmly entrenched in America and often reported in newspapers. As former warden Cabana noted, this and other customs and rituals became incorporated into official procedures, which “helps the warden and the prison staff get on through the damn execution process because you’ve got things you have to tend to. . . . It is not something that any individual designed. It’s kind of come together over centuries” (quoted in Dow 2002:189).

After executions were conducted in private with few witnesses, prisons disseminated scant information to the newspapers beyond the name of the condemned, the instrument of death, and the person’s dying words and last food that define the event for readers. Aware of little about the ritual of execution beyond the final comments and food choice, the public nevertheless makes inferences or projects feelings and constructs opinions in opposition to or in support of the death penalty. Generally overlooked in scholarship and sometimes misinterpreted by the public, the ceremonial last meal confirms Margaret Visser’s observation in Much Depends on Dinner (1986:12) that “[f]ood is never just something to eat”—whether for the living or, in this instance, for the dying.
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Notes

1. In his article on prison lore, Jackson mentions a “hot stick,” that is, an immersion heater used by prisoners to warm food and beverages in their cells (1965). In Death Row (1980:125–35), Jackson and Christian list items in meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner as part of each day’s rundown of activities in a Texas prison over a three-day span, but say nothing about “last meal” or attitudes toward it. And in their book In This Timeless Time (2012:19–27), Jackson and Christian include photos showing a guard and porters filling trays from food trolleys and slipping the trays under cell doors as well as a porter picking up empty trays in the hall outside the cells. The same scene occurs for a brief period in their film Death Row, followed by the delivery of commissary items, including five cans of Dr Pepper, to one cell.

There is nothing about the last meal before execution except the statement (2012:167) that everything including the food ordered is officially noted on the day of execution.

2. The source of these counts are 245 final meal requests (65 of the 310 inmates declined food) between December 7, 1982, and September 10, 2003, listed by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice at the online site web.archive.org (accessed August 8, 2010). David Shaw (2004) states that there were 314 executions since 1982. By his count, 111 death row inmates ordered fries, 85 requested hamburgers, 54 wanted steak (none was honored after 1993; see statements by Brian Price who prepared last meals—in Price 2004b and in Hannaford 2004), 56 asked for ice cream (and another 19 requested milk shakes), and 50 opted for chicken (mostly fried). In 1998, Sam Howe Verhovek, referring to the 144 men executed by Texas over the previous 15 years, notes that

[b]urgers top the entrees. Twenty-two men chose double cheeseburgers, 15 opted for single cheeseburgers, 9 for hamburgers. Next most popular were steaks, typically T-bones, with 27 requests, and eggs (10 requests, most for scrambled). Most desired overall is a side of french fries (56 requests). Ice cream is the most popular dessert (21 requests), Coca-Cola the most popular beverage (13, just edging out 12 requests for iced tea). And 24 inmates declined any last meal at all.

At least in Texas, then, burgers and fries head the list, followed by steak and chicken.

3. These counts are based on profiles in Price (2004b), which lists the educational level of 212 inmates, 16 of whom, however, the information is not known. In regard to 10 individuals, it is not possible for me to determine if money, vehicles, or other stolen objects were involved so I based figures on 202 people, of whom 135 benefitted materially. The examples, in order, are Richard Donald Foster, Glen Charles McGinnis, and Earl Carl Heiselbetz, Jr. (Price 2004b), and James David (“Cowboy”) Autry (Serrill 1983). As often noted, the inmates have come from impoverished backgrounds. San Quentin warden Clifton Duffy remarked: “It seems to me the death penalty is a privilege reserved for the poor” (Dow 2002:184), echoed by John Spenkelink, electrocuted in Florida on December 7, 1982, and September 10, 2003, listed by the Chronicle of Higher Education (2003:13–14).

4. Two recent articles lend support to this interpretation that seeking comfort through food choice is a major factor accounting for many of the items in last meal requests. In their studies of the effects of “mortality salience” (preoccupation with one’s death), Friese and Hofmann (2008) confirmed the hypotheses that individuals turn to their own culture and worldview as a psychological buffer, choosing familiar and therefore comforting food and beverage over something foreign, and that in high mortality salience, there is often impaired self-control resulting in increased impulsive behavior. In “Death Row Nutrition,” Wansink, Kniffin, and Shimizu (2012) analyzed the contents of 193 last meal orders of prisoners in several states, executed between 2002 and 2006. They found that the average number of calories in a last meal request was 2,756 (in four instances, it was 7,200 or more), which is greater than the 2,200 to 2,400 recommended for sedentary males for an entire day. The most frequent items asked for were meat (83.9 percent), fried food (67.9 percent), desserts (66.3 percent), and soft drinks (60 percent). In regard
to starches and grains, 40.9 percent of requests were for french fries, 20.7 percent for other potato sides, and 17.1 percent for bread. Nuts appeared in only one of the orders, and yogurt, tofu, and specifically vegetarian meals were not requested at all. Their findings “are consistent with studies of how food is used to mediate feelings of stress and distress” (Wansink, Kniffin, and Shimizu 2012:837), that is, a craving for or overindulgence in fats and carbohydrates—high caloric food consumption—when an individual is under duress and the future appears bleak.

5. I based the calculations on data in Malone (2006) concerning the last words of 355 prisoners executed in Texas from December 7, 1982, to November 16, 2005, and the final meal requests of 310 inmates from December 7, 1982, to September 10, 2003, on the archived list issued by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (web.archive.org). Usable records that contain both last words and final meals total 237. I coded the data into six themes evident in last words (“no last words,” “innocence,” “remorsefulness,” “resignation,” “bravado,” and “defiance”) and four categories of last meal requests (“no food requested,” “light meal or snack,” “normal meal,” and “excessive”). For other efforts at thematic analysis, see Black (2008); and Rice, Dirks, and Exline (2009).

6. This newspaper and others cited later were accessed from http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82016187/ and www.newspaperarchive.com.

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