

Last Meal

What would you choose to eat if you knew you were eating for the last time? Would it be a sentimental treat like a plate of grandma's Christmas sugar cookies or an epicurean splurge on a 3-star meal out of the Michelin guide? Perhaps you could test out that lifelong shellfish allergy with some potentially deadly bouillabaisse or create a gas station feast of all of your favorite greasy snacks, the ones that might slowly kill you if eaten every day. Would you want to cook the meal yourself? Would you want company? Would you be able to eat at all?

Regardless of your answer, I'm certain we've all pictured ourselves on death row and pondered what our last meal might consist of. In these voyeuristic times, it's nearly impossible to avoid articles about the strangest last meals death row inmates have requested or coverage of artistic statements against capital punishment itself. It's equally impossible to reconcile the diverging thought processes that led to development of this ancient phenomenon of filling a condemned person's stomach with fine food shortly before executing them.

Public interest in inmate's last meals has been driven in recent years by books such as 2007's "My Last Supper", photographer Melanie Dunea's compilation of fifty celebrity chefs answering the question, "What would be your last meal on earth?" In the book's introduction, Anthony Bourdain states that "chefs have been playing the 'My Last Supper' game, in version or another, since humans first gathered round the flames to cook." I recall a similar passage from my repeated readings of "Kitchen Confidential" where Bourdain describes a culinary colleague leaning in close enough to whisper his response into the author's lapels: "Cold meatloaf sandwich. *Shhh*...don't tell anyone."

But this game isn't exclusive to chefs; I've often posed this question to my writing students as an icebreaker on the first day of class. Responses range from the

TEXAS, 2009 - Yousvanis Valle. Robbed and murdered man in his home. Four hamburgers (almost burned), potato fries (almost burned), Mexican rice (almost burned), fresh onion, jalapenos, tomato, cheese, and salad dressing. Lethal injection.

OHIO, 2009 - John Fautenberry. Murdered six people while hitchhiking. Two eggs sunny-side up, fried potatoes, two pieces of fried bologna, four pieces of wheat bread, two pieces of wheat toast with butter, four slices of tomato, a side of lettuce and mayonnaise, two Three Musketeers candy bars and two packages of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Lethal injection.

common (cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate milkshake) to the more inventive (grandma's spaghetti Bolognese, a gingerbread house, and a blunt) as the mood in the room shifts from reserved to utterly candid; I almost learn more about them on that first day through that one answer than I do in a semester of reading their work. Similarly, during my research for this piece,

I posted a Facebook status asking my friends for their last meals; it received 87 comments in one day. People I hadn't heard from in years emerged from electronic obscurity to answer me. The comments were generally light-hearted; only one friend answered that she wouldn't be able to eat anything because of the guilt. The others seemed further removed from the idea of being executed afterward, a mental omission necessary to turn human lives into a parlor game.

While it seems unlikely that humans have been playing the "Last Supper" game since the advent of fire, it's certainly been a topic of conversation since man created orderly ways of putting each other to death. But the precise origin of providing prisoners a last meal is difficult to pin down. While the earliest record of the death penalty has been traced back to the Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu—the oldest known code of law still enforced today—no standard of last rites are mentioned. These thirty-two laws, etched into titian clay tablets pulled from ancient Mesopotamia's mud-rich landscape, state in plain terms, "If a man commits a murder, that man must be killed." An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Proof of a more standardized last meal ritual cannot be found before ancient Rome. Gladiators were furnished a mighty feast the night before their bout in the Colosseum known as the *Coena Libera*. Knowing this meal would likely be their final luxury unless they emerged victorious the next day, the men gorged on fermented farro bread with olive oil, dried fruit, high protein treats of roasted meats and fresh cheeses, goat milk with honey and walnuts, and large quantities of onions and wild lettuce to "lighten the balance of the blood". The 'celebration' typically lasted several hours as the gladiators were instructed to chew their food well in order to extract as much energy from it as possible. Of this practice, Seneca the Younger wrote, "The gladiators eat and drink what they will give back with their blood."

Much later on in 18th century London, prisoners in otherwise good standing were granted the privilege of a party with guests and alcohol the night before their sentence ended. The next morning, on their three-mile trudge to the gallows, the procession would stop at a pub somewhere along the route where the prisoner was given "a great bowl of ale to drink at their pleasure, as

*NEW YORK, 1963 –
Eddie Lee Mays.
Serial burglar and
murderer of one. A
pack of Pall Malls.
Electrocution.*

their last refreshment in life." Though I've never stared down a hangman's noose, I cannot imagine being drunk would help the situation in any measurable way.

*OKLAHOMA, 1995 –
Thomas J. Grasso. Strangled
an 87-year-old woman in
her home with Christmas
lights on Christmas Eve.
Two dozen steamed
mussels, two dozen steamed
clams (flavored by a wedge
of lemon), a double
cheeseburger from Burger
King, a half-dozen
barbecued spare ribs, two
strawberry milkshakes, half
a pumpkin pie with
whipped cream, diced
strawberries, and a can of
SpaghettiOs with
meatballs. Used his final
statement to say, "I did not
get my SpaghettiOs. I got
spaghetti. I want the press
to know this." Lethal
injection.*

Today, Western culture remains fascinated by the last meals of death row inmates. Apart from the US, Japan and South Korea are the only industrialized democracies among the fifty-eight countries in the world to enforce capital punishment. However, the concept of a last meal doesn't exist in Japan since the condemned are not notified of their execution until the day it will occur. South Korea similarly does not have the option, offering instead the typical daily fare served to all other inmates. It's difficult to understand why the US is the only nation still adhering to this strange, old tradition. And furthermore, why the contents of these meals are published for the public consumption. Further still, why I read them with a voracious, macabre interest.

In 2009, John Allen Muhammed, one half of the sniper duo responsible for terrorizing the DC tri-state area in a series of attacks in 2002, was executed. At twelve years old, I was old enough to remember when a man in a suit was killed at the Sunoco station across from my father's office. My father, a guy in a suit. "Call me God," a Tarot card found at the scene read. My dad came home that night but someone else's didn't. I remember those three autumn weeks at school, how we weren't allowed to go outside for sports practices and had to use interior walkways to get to class. We played field hockey on a rubber gym floor and gasped every time we saw a white van. Though later the gunmen would be found in a hollowed-out Chevy Caprice, we were all so certain they were in a white van. Muhammed ate some chicken in red sauce with a slice of strawberry cake before he was given a lethal injection and I don't know how to feel about it.

IOWA, 1963 – Victor Harry Feguer. Killed a doctor after cold calling random physicians from the Yellow pages to steal drugs; left his body in a cornfield. Requested a single unpitted olive, telling prison officials he hoped it would sprout from his body as an olive tree of peace. Hanging.

Sometimes when I read last meal requests, I get upset. I get upset, but not for the reason you might think. Marion Albert Pruett, executed in Arkansas in 2009, was a serial killer who began his killing spree while under government protection. Pruett was given a new name ("Sonny") and \$800 after testifying about a federal prison slaying in Atlanta that he later admitted to committing. His killing spree ended in 1981 after he robbed and murdered his common-law wife to support his \$4,000 a week cocaine habit. She was beaten to death and set on fire. From death row, Pruett solicited \$20,000 from Mississippi newspaper to disclose the location of her engagement ring, in addition to offering up the location of a Florida victim in exchange for a paid appearance on *Geraldo*. Pruett's last meal request reads like its own kind of spree: Stuffed crust pizza from Pizza Hut, four Burger King Whoppers, a large order of French fries, three two-liter bottles of Pepsi, a bucket of ice, a bottle of ketchup, salt, fried eggplant, fried squash, fried okra, and a pecan pie shared with another prisoner slated to die the same day. He later had the gall to say that he originally wanted roast duck but didn't feel

confident in the prison kitchen's ability to prepare it. I find myself less upset at the loss of a man's life than I do at his megalomaniacal sense of entitlement.

Some people, perhaps a bit like myself, consider the privilege of a final feast at the taxpayer's expense to be too much to take. But these meals are, in fact, requests. What the prisoner asks for and what they ultimately receive is seldom exactly as printed. For instance—one of the few capital punishment states still allowing last meal requests—stipulates that the food must be purchased locally and cost no more than \$40. The state of Texas abolished last meal requests in 2011, before these cost restrictions were put into place, after a prisoner requested an absolutely gargantuan feast and refused to eat any of it.¹

Texas senator John Whitmire called the meal “inappropriate” and ended the then-87-year Texas tradition of customized last meals for inmates stating, ““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.”

Former death row cook Brian Price, who prepared more than 200 meals for condemned killers throughout his career with the Texas prison system, called the Senator's complaints overblown, and accused him of grandstanding to his base.

TEXAS, 1990 – James Edward Smith. Murderer. Requested a lump of dirt to perform a voodoo ritual. Was served yogurt instead. Lethal injection.

“They only get items in the commissary kitchen,” Price said. “If they order lobster, they get a piece of frozen pollack. They quit serving steaks in 1994. If they order 100 tacos, they get two or three...Whitmire's just getting on a political soapbox.” Though those involved know the truth about last meal requests, why isn't the actual meal published alongside them? Would it be too sad to read about a prisoner eating gruel off of a

gray, plastic cafeteria tray in solitary confinement? Too feudal?

Perhaps it's a small act of penance between the executioner and the damned, at least in the eyes of the viewing public. David LaChance, an assistant professor of history at Emory University has argued, “that the rituals of a last meal—and of allowing last words—have persisted in this otherwise emotionally denuded process precisely because they restore enough of the condemned's humanity to satisfy the public's desire for the punishment to fit the crime, thereby helping to ensure

¹ A plate of two chicken-fried steaks with gravy and sliced onions, a triple bacon cheeseburger, a cheese omelette with ground beef, tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, jalapeños, a bowl of fried okra with ketchup, a pound of barbecued meat with half a loaf of white bread, three fajitas, a meat lover's pizza, a pint of Blue Bell ice cream, a slab of peanut butter fudge with crushed peanuts, and a serving equivalent to three root beers.

continued support for the death penalty. The state, through the media, reinforces a retributive understanding of the individual as an agent who has acted freely in the world, unfettered by circumstance or social condition. And yet, through myriad other procedures designed to objectify, pacify, and manipulate the offender, the state signals its ability to maintain order and satisfy our retributive urges safely and humanely.”