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The Evolution of Dinner

By Claire Stewart

A review of ***Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal*** by Abigail Carroll
(Basic Books, 2013)

Food historian Abigail Carroll's debut book, *Three Squares: the Invention of the American Meal*, explores the historical reasons why we eat what we do, and when. Combing through a range of primary sources, she analyzes how our eating choices have been determined by our changing economic circumstances. Carroll proves that history unfolds at our dinner table, and that this story can be enlightening and entertaining. The items that we eat, and even the hour of the day in which we eat, tell an appealing story.

Carroll states that she intended to write a book specifically about snacking, but when researching the backstory of iconic American snack foods such as peanuts and popcorn, she repeatedly came up against the bigger story of the "meal." Snacking, prompted by a burgeoning commercial food industry, soon became regarded as a menace to the family meal, threatening the sanctity of the family "fellowship" found around the dinner table. (And, this domestic bonding was already in flux due to shifting social norms prompted by the Industrial Revolution). The "snack" came to exist in opposition to the "meal," prompting Carroll to extend her considerable research skills to the broader topic of the history of eating in America.

Three Squares begins with an overview of colonial eating habits, describing a young country with few commercial and manufacturing resources; a circumstance reflected in its sparse meal-time practices. Carroll reports that only one third of families in seventeenth century Virginia had chairs, and less than one in four households had tables. Dining colonists perched on the bed, squatted, or stood. (Children were frequently expected to stand, and women often ate separately). A rustic plank would often be laid across brackets or

propped against a cradle, (hence the term “room and board”). Silverware was uncommon except among the wealthy, and diners used their hands and ate off trenchers (thick slices of stale bread) in lieu of plates. These trenchers, crude wooden bowls, and cups, were often shared between siblings who ate in shifts. Carroll notes that family members rarely faced one another while dining, and would most likely eat rapidly and in silence. Ironically, this report of the American meal as purely utilitarian deflates the modern complaint that America’s supposed decline may be traced to the upheaval of the idealized American family dinner.

The cookstove, introduced in the 1830s, was considered dangerous, and viewed with national suspicion. In 1850 President Millard Fillmore’s wife Abigail installed a stove in the White House, and her domestic staff walked off the job in protest. It took years for the stove to supplant the hearth as the centerpiece of domestic life, but its introduction eventually ushered in vast changes to American homes. Change would soon come to American kitchens, but most of this change, Carroll states, was due to industrialization.

The timetable favored by an agrarian society included a large midday meal, with workers up at dawn and ready for a substantial meal by noon. Called “dinner,” it was the largest repast of the day, and even among the upper classes who slept later, it was always eaten in the afternoon. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, it was becoming fashionable to eat dinner later in the day. Carroll has dug through countless documents related to this change. She tracks fashionable meal times through hotel reservations, and quotes vintage magazine articles. In 1890 a columnist advised that reputable sorts should not dine before five o’clock, reporting that “society will tolerate three, and will often forgive two,” but to eat any earlier would indicate their being of the laborer class.

As Americans moved into newly created jobs in the city, social visits became thwarted by the uncertainty of the time of the family dinner. Households were adapting at varying rates to this new custom of eating later in the day. Regional differences further complicated matters, such as in 1886 when *Harper’s Bazaar* reported that Bostonians ate dinner earlier than New Yorkers, while a Chicago newspaper explained that city dwellers ate later than country folks. For those who had moved to the newly built suburbs, the dinner hour was swiftly moved to the evening, commuters no longer able to come home in the middle of the workday for meals. Offices and factories by necessity came to standardize meal time, too, as workers were now to live “under the dictatorship of the calendar and the clock.”

Three Squares next features an engaging discussion about bagged lunches, lunch pails, and school lunches. Here again one finds copious research, Carroll exploring records from the Department of Labor, the Rhode Island Board of Education, as well as personal diaries and household accounts.

The 1930s ushered in the age of packaged goods, homes became flooded with crackers and cookies wrapped in individual coverings. This was sold and perceived as more sophisticated and modern than the old way: selling foods in bulk out of barrels and bins. Commercial food producers were quick to see the possibility of recipes featuring multiple uses for their products—the age of canned tuna casserole with potato chips was born! The author explores the history of pretzels, potato chips, and candy bars, and we learn the particulars of Laura Scudder’s wax paper packing, and about the invention of the potato-peeling machine. Carroll posits that individual wrapping and slick advertising made food appear “hygienic.” A cook who used recipes made with various pre-made foodstuffs was embracing new technology and modernity. With the Tootsie Roll—the first individually wrapped candy sold in America—dominating grocery store shelves, manufacturers churned out more and more sealed and packaged foodstuffs.

Carroll opts not to draw a parallel between the country’s new mania for hygiene and its shifting settlement patterns. A craze for sanitation, in fact, developed in tandem with the idealization of the healthful and pure rural life. As cities became crowded and the urban population soared, advertising touted “purity.” This campaign was accelerated by the perception that the immigrants pouring into busy cities were “dirty” and food choices were one way to strive for purity.

This chapter, addressing America’s enthusiasm for hygiene, which was reflected in a new trend in consumer spending, regrettably misses an opportunity to explore a subject ripe for investigation. That Carroll touches so lightly on the role pre-packaged food had in women’s lives is unfortunate. Carroll notes that food writers labored to “help the housewife make sense of the lexicon of possibilities” posed by the new variety of packaged foods, yet she does not reveal that these same possibilities worked to keep woman in the kitchen longer. Carroll does not reveal that meal time now had moved from a utilitarian endeavor to one fraught with raised expectations of creativity; a justification for women remaining cooped up at home, in the kitchen. The Industrial Revolution had filled homes with gadgets and cleaning aids, so what were women to do all day now that they had vacuum cleaners and

stoves? Meals were now to be attractive, colorful and clever, garnished with bottled condiments and presented in a spotless dining room to scrubbed children. There is a lot of literature showing that these newly elevated expectations of fastidiousness (in both home appearance and meal presentation) led to a new set of pressures on the American housewife. These pressures increased in the 1950s and contributed to the rise of the women's movement in the early 1960s. It is a loss that a writer as knowledgeable and studious as Carroll did not use the opportunity of this book to broaden a discussion which surely is not confined to feminist tracts. If one is writing about food and cooking, the female perspective is worthy of special discussion.

Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal is, however, an informative and entertaining read. It is smoothly written and full of fun facts (such as that Wonder bread became in 1930 the first pre-sliced bread and was really considered a "wonder." Its arrival started a toaster revolution and irreversibly changed breakfast patterns). Abigail Carroll is a talented researcher and an effective storyteller. She took a topic as unassuming as how dinner time shifted from the afternoon to the evening, and made it an appealing walk through American history.

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A professional chef and graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Claire Stewart teaches culinary arts at the New York City College of Technology, CUNY.