

THE LAST SUPPER

Julie green
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Julie Green, *The Last Supper*, ongoing project, mineral paint on ceramic plates, 9 feet by 20 feet by 1 inch. Liggett Studio, Tulsa, Oklahoma (Photograph by Deborah Brackenbury, 2006)

His right foot, clad in a blue slipper, shook nervously.... After officials began administering the drugs at 12:09 a.m., Johnson blinked three times and let out a breath through puffed cheeks. His foot stopped shaking. His eyes slowly dimmed, became glassy and closed to a crescent.... He asked for a final meal of three fried chicken thighs, 10 or 15 shrimp, tater tots with ketchup, two slices of pecan pie, strawberry ice cream, honey and biscuits and a Coke.

This inmate's execution details were printed in the January 7, 2000 *Norman Transcript*. Seventy years ago Virginia Woolf called the daily paper "history in the raw." Her words still ring true.

It is my habit to begin the day reading the paper with my tea and toast. That morning in Oklahoma I first learned about the last meals of death row inmates. A final meal request represents an individual, and for me, humanizes death row statistics. For the past seven years, I have collected final meal requests, researched the history of final

meals in the United States, and painted 283 porcelain plates illustrating the menus. The ongoing project is titled *The Last Supper*. My interest in final meals comes from an opposition to capital punishment. It is also related, I am sure, to my life-long passion for food. We all want and need food. At least on this one level, we can relate to the condemned. We have food in common.

Final Meal Requests

Last meals are not, as one might assume, an unqualified act of generosity on the part of the state. Maryland does not offer a final meal selection; Texas and Virginia inmates are limited to food in the prison kitchen, a modest pantry indeed. States with fewer executions, however, do offer genuine choices. These meals tend to be more personal and revealing about the inmate's race, region, and class.

According to Department of Corrections records, no state allows cigarettes. In 1997 Larry Wayne White requested a meal of liver and fried onions, tomatoes, cottage cheese, and a cigarette. Under a new order by former Texas Governor George W. Bush, cigarettes were banned on "health grounds." White didn't receive his

Oregon State University Professor Julie Green divides studio time between personal narrative paintings and *The Last Supper* while the plates are quite different than the paintings, both are observations of contemporary society.
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final smoke.¹ In other states, inmates still request cigarettes and sometimes receive them. Alcohol is never provided, although it is asked for from time to time. One inmate even requested Dom Perignon champagne. Texas denies bubble gum.

Open Records laws allow the public to obtain information about last suppers. Through practice, I learned to call the public information officer (PIO), not the warden. Most public information officers are quick to respond. I begin inquiries with "This is Professor Julie Green from Oregon State University, doing research on death row inmates' final meals." I never mention I am an artist, a title I imagine might equate to "troublemaker."

To examine variations among the final meal policies, I contacted the Department of Corrections in all thirty-eight death penalty states (currently thirty seven, New York no longer has a death penalty). Each PIO was asked the following questions:

- Is there a dollar limit for the meal?
- Is the meal eaten alone?
- What is the purpose of the special meal?
- Who cooks the meal: staff or an inmate?
- Any other information on the special meal?

Most states replied to my questions, answering one or two of the five questions. Department of Corrections replies, listed below along with state information, are in order of highest numbers of executions:

Texas has carried out 405 executions. Since 1976, Texas accounts for one-third of all U.S. death penalty executions. Death penalty executions in the U.S. total 1099. Well-practiced procedures are in place. There is a dollar limit, and foods must be available in the prison kitchen. A 3:30 P.M. meal is served before the 6 P.M. execution.

In Virginia, until 2004, repeated requests for information were denied. There is a policy of not providing menu details in order to protect inmates' privacy. Virginia's gesture of civil liberty is curious—at 98 executions its record is second only to that of Texas. Virginia menus are never elaborate or personal; the choices, evidently, are limited to foods on hand in the prison kitchen.

Oklahoma allowed a twenty-dollar meal limit in 2000; it has since been lowered to fifteen dollars. The inmate eats alone in his or her cell. I called the *Norman Transcript* to ask why final meals were in the newspaper and was told the "public wants to know." The prison warden gave an identical reply. The warden then asked if I was one of those people calling to complain about the twenty dollars spent on the prisoner's last meal.

Florida has a twenty-dollar meal allowance limit to avoid extravagance. Food must be available locally. Surprisingly, the executioner in Florida is a private citizen, paid \$150 per execution.

Georgia will prepare local lobster, but will not fly it in from Maine. If no request is made, a meal of steak and eggs is served. Only one last meal is allowed. If an inmate is granted a stay of execution and has eaten his last meal,

on subsequent execution days he will eat what everyone else eats. (Note the use of "he" and "his" is common usage in many states although females are also executed).

South Carolina says the last meal is U.S. tradition, seen as a humanitarian gesture afforded to the condemned.

Missouri, North Carolina, Nevada, Arkansas, Delaware, and Utah did not respond to repeated inquiries.

Alabama allows meals made of food available in the prison kitchen. This means no steak and no lobster. The meal is usually eaten while visiting with family and friends.

Louisiana prisons did not respond to my repeated inquiries. Information on three Louisiana inmates' last suppers at Angola Prison comes from Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*:

Sister Prejean joined Patrick Sonnier for his final meal. After Sonnier completes his large meal, he comments, "There, finished, and I wasn't even hungry." To the warden he says, "Warden, tell that chef, tell him for me that he did a really great job. The steak was perfect and the potato salad, and really great apple pie... I am truly, truly, appreciative."²

Prejean also describes Antonio James's final meal. Menu and guests are selected by the warden and prisoner. The table is dressed with a nice white tablecloth. Warden Cain, at the head of the table, is showing his Christian fellowship by providing a feast of boiled crawfish. The group holds hands, prays, sings hymns, and laughs during the pleasant meal.

Dobie Gillis Williams declined sharing a meal with Warden Cain. Williams said, "I ain't going to eat with those people. It's not like, you know *real* fellowship. When they finish eating they're going to help kill me." Dobie Gillis Williams had an IQ of 65; a score of 70 indicates mental retardation.³

Arizona allows food available at local grocers.

Ohio writes the purpose of the meal is to allow the inmate to have what he really wants for one last time.

Indiana prisons prefer to call it a "special meal," not a final meal.

California, with a fifty-dollar limit, has the most generous meal allowance. The meal can be made in the prison or picked up from Burger King, Domino's Pizza, or other nearby restaurants.

Illinois has a moratorium in place. DNA testing has altered the landscape of death row at state and national levels, and Illinois has become an important state for the study of changes in death penalty policy. In 2003, Governor Ryan granted clemency to 167 death row inmates after new DNA testing identified wrongful convictions. Illinois released thirteen innocent men from death row. Prior to the moratorium, Illinois requests for filet mignon and cannoli suggest bountiful final meals.

Mississippi inmates can have a meal made in the prison or by a local restaurant. Mississippi explains the final meal is just a tradition.

Maryland is the only state that doesn't allow any type of final meal. In Maryland, the condemned eats the regular prison menu of the day.

Washington inmates have very limited options, selecting from the regular prison menu of the day, often salmon or pizza.

Pennsylvania has a unique pre-established menu form, not unlike the menus found at sushi restaurants. The condemned checks off items in each category:

SCI-ROCKVIEW FINAL MEAL SELECTION

DATE: _____

<p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Grilled Beef Steak <input type="checkbox"/> Roast Beef <input type="checkbox"/> Beef Slice <input type="checkbox"/> Cheesburger <input type="checkbox"/> Salisbury Steak <input type="checkbox"/> Beef Barbecue <input type="checkbox"/> Hamburger <input type="checkbox"/> Sliced Green Pepper <input type="checkbox"/> Grilled Cheese Sandwich <input type="checkbox"/> Pizza <input type="checkbox"/> Roast Pork <input type="checkbox"/> Fried Chicken <input type="checkbox"/> Pork Chop <input type="checkbox"/> Pork Barbecue <input type="checkbox"/> Cold Meat (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Sliced Cheese (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Meat Loaf <input type="checkbox"/> Pork Loaf <input type="checkbox"/> Corn Beef <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish Rice <input type="checkbox"/> Meat Parmesan <input type="checkbox"/> Meat Loaf <input type="checkbox"/> Roast Turkey <input type="checkbox"/> Fried Chicken Quarter <input type="checkbox"/> Sliced Chicken Quarter <input type="checkbox"/> Chicken Ala King <input type="checkbox"/> Brailed Frankfurter (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Grilled Frankfurter (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Deep Fried Haddock <input type="checkbox"/> Baked Haddock <input type="checkbox"/> Tuna Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Tuna Pattie <input type="checkbox"/> Lasagna <input type="checkbox"/> Spaghetti w/ Sauce <input type="checkbox"/> Macaroni & Cheese <input type="checkbox"/> Ravioli 	<p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Baked Potato <input type="checkbox"/> French Baked Potato <input type="checkbox"/> Home Fried Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Mash Brown Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> French Fried Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Kishoid Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Potato Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Scalloped Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Potato Gravy <input type="checkbox"/> Cottage Fried Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Paralyzed Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> O'Brien Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Sweet Potatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Buttered Noodles <input type="checkbox"/> Buttered Rice <p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Beef Barley Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Beef Noodle Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Chicken Rice Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Chicken Vegetable Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Meat Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Cream of Mushroom Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Cream of Potato Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Split Pea Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Tomato Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Potato Rice Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Chai Chowder <input type="checkbox"/> Corn Chowder <input type="checkbox"/> French Onion Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Lima Bean Soup <input type="checkbox"/> Maitre d'au Soup 	<p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Green Bean <input type="checkbox"/> Lima Bean <input type="checkbox"/> Kidney Bean <input type="checkbox"/> Navy Bean <input type="checkbox"/> New Bean <input type="checkbox"/> Shred Beans <input type="checkbox"/> Creamed Corn <input type="checkbox"/> White Corn <input type="checkbox"/> Black-eyed Peas <input type="checkbox"/> Carrots <input type="checkbox"/> Spinach <input type="checkbox"/> Tomatoes <input type="checkbox"/> Cauliflower <input type="checkbox"/> Broccoli <input type="checkbox"/> Asparagus <input type="checkbox"/> Collard Greens <input type="checkbox"/> Mustard Greens <input type="checkbox"/> Shauerkraut <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed Vegetables <input type="checkbox"/> Baked Beans <input type="checkbox"/> Macaroni <p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cream Cold Slaw <input type="checkbox"/> Creamed Lettuce <input type="checkbox"/> Carrot, Raisin, Celery Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Jelly Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Pickled Beet & Onion Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed Bean Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Molokai Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Cranberry Sauce <input type="checkbox"/> Pickles <input type="checkbox"/> Celery Stick (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Carrot Stick (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Lettuce Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Tomato Salad <input type="checkbox"/> Apple Sauce 	<p>(CHOICE OF ONE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Apples (3) <input type="checkbox"/> Peeling <input type="checkbox"/> Ice Cream <input type="checkbox"/> Cakes <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Cocktail (1 Cup) <input type="checkbox"/> Plums (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Apples (1 Cup) <input type="checkbox"/> Sliced Pineapple (2) <input type="checkbox"/> Gabbler <input type="checkbox"/> Pears (1 Cup) <input type="checkbox"/> Berries (1 Cup) <input type="checkbox"/> Donuts (2) <p>(CHOICE OF TWO)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Coffee <input type="checkbox"/> Hot Tea <input type="checkbox"/> Cold Tea <input type="checkbox"/> Milk <input type="checkbox"/> Chocolate <input type="checkbox"/> Coca Cola <input type="checkbox"/> Hot Chocolate Milk <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Juice <p>(ANY CHOICE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Softop <input type="checkbox"/> Nutford <input type="checkbox"/> Wilton <input type="checkbox"/> Butter <input type="checkbox"/> Bread <input type="checkbox"/> Sugar <input type="checkbox"/> Salt <input type="checkbox"/> Pepper <input type="checkbox"/> Crackers (4)
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SELECTED BY: Twinkle Bunn & Number PREPARED BY: Carri, Food Service Manager APPROVED BY: Debrah Slight for Operations

Figure 2: *Sci-Rockview Final Meal Selection, 2005* (provided by Pennsylvania Department of Corrections)

Oregon inmates eat alone, under staff supervision. The meal is a courtesy, cooked by staff. Reasonable requests are accommodated: “maybe steak, but not ‘T-Bone’ steak.”

Nebraska, Idaho, Kentucky, Connecticut, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Wyoming have few executions and generous last supper allowances. These allow for more extravagance, as seen in the sole Idaho final meal: 6 January 1994: Prime rib, lobster, 2 pints of black walnut ice cream, rolls, 1/2 gallon milk, 2 liter bottle of Coca Cola.

New Jersey, South Dakota, and New Hampshire have the death penalty on the books but have not had an execution since reinstatement in 1976.

Kansas has had no executions since reinstatement in 1976. The Kansas State Supreme Court ruled its death penalty statute unconstitutional in 2004, due to a provision giving the state an advantage in sentencing. In 2006, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Kansas State Supreme Court ruling.

In all states, records of specific final meals prior to 1950 are not available. We do know, though, that in the early part of the twentieth-century in Washington State, a condemned man tried to eat so much as to be too fat to fall through the trapdoor when he was hanged. Around this time, a convict named Donald Schneider also attempted to gorge himself so he wouldn't fit into the electric chair. Neither succeeded.

Until a few years ago, one needed to call the prisons to obtain final meal requests. Texas was the exception, in

this as in other aspects of capital punishment. For years the Texas Department of Corrections website listed over 300 final meal requests from 1982 - 2003. Recently the website was revised, and final meals were omitted due to negative publicity. The deleted record of Texas inmates' meals can now be found at The Memory Hole website at <http://www.thememoryhole.org/deaths/texas-final-meals.htm>

The Death Penalty Information Center, at www.death-penaltyinfo.org, is an excellent resource covering all aspects of capital punishment. There is another website which focuses on the final meals: deadmaneating.com includes all death penalty states and lists each final meal since 2002. This site is a strange combination of information about the crime, last words, and the final meal, alongside bad jokes and thong underwear, printed with “Dead Man Eating,” for sale. Attempts at gallows' humor are also found in the book, *Meals to Die For*, by Brian Price. Price, a former non-death row inmate and a chef who prepared 218 final Texas meals, provides insider details not found elsewhere. Body Bag Baked Beans and Gas Chamber Chicken are a few of the recipes found at the end of the book. In April 2006, I attended Price's articulate and compassionate talk at *The Last Supper* event at The New School in New York. He spoke of being changed by his experiences as a death-row chef. With a new wife and a career as a Christian radio show host, Price now appreciates the smallest of daily freedoms many of us take for granted.

Whatever our stand on capital punishment, as when Brian Price talks about preparing last meals, emotions are often complex and conflicting. Sometimes it was a moving experience; sometimes it was just part of a day's work. When a crime takes place in familiar territory, it becomes more personal and worrisome. “I was driving through the Houston area shortly after these murders (of four young men) at the raceway took place. I remember thinking what a terrible loss it had to have been to these young victims' families. I was enraged at whoever had done this unnecessary deed. I'm glad he declined a last meal.”⁵

Price describes another experience: “When I was preparing Kenneth Gentry's last meal, I found myself trying to get into the mind of the man who would request butter beans for his last supper. I began to picture him as a child, sitting at the dinner table with his siblings as their mother spooned out a big helping of the buttery leguminous seeds to each of her children.”⁶

“The big feed” is prison slang for last meals. When analyzing the meals, I am struck by the quantity and modesty of the foods. There is a great deal of American diner food: burgers, sandwiches, fries, ice cream, some fruits, and fewer green vegetables. Gourmet food or international food is scarce, except for Mexican food ordered by Hispanic inmates in the Western states.

Food choices are as personal and telling as the homes, cars, and clothing we select. For adults, in prison or not, food choices often reflect childhood and regional favorites. Pomegranate ordered by a Middle Eastern inmate no doubt reminded him of his ancestral home:



Figure 3: plate: 10 x 10 in., *Oklahoma 6 December 2001 One chicken, two cans of olives, grapes, and one palmgranite (sic).*

Locale plays a large part in menu selection. Death-row inmates represent a fraction of the population, yet from this small group we learn which foods are popular in each state. Florida serves a great deal of seafood. In the south we find scotch eggs and butter beans. Missourians are big steak eaters. The healthy meals stand out, being few and far between.

One inmate had a non-food request:

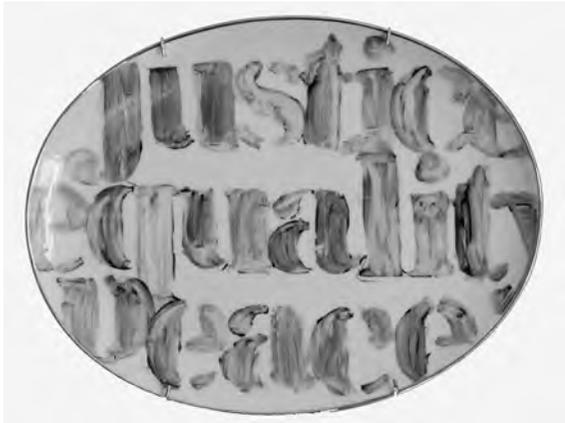


Figure 4: plate: 5 x 7 in., *Texas 1 March 2000*

As Brian Price mentioned, only he knows if his wish was filled.

Another made a request for communion:



Figure 5: plate: 6 x 6 in., *Oklahoma 7 March 2001, 1 cracker and grape juice*

Some inmates provide a specific and lengthy list, such as a Texas request for two 16 oz. ribeyes, one lb. turkey breast; twelve bacon strips; two hamburgers with mayo, onion & lettuce; two large baked potatoes, butter, sour cream, cheese, & chives; four slices of cheese or 1/2 lb. of grated cheddar cheese; chef salad; blue cheese dressing; two corn on the cob; one pt. mint chocolate chip ice cream; four vanilla Cokes or Mr. Pibb (Note: The steaks will not be provided to this Texas inmate).

Other requests are surprisingly small:



Figure 6: plate: 8 x 8 in., *Texas 22 October 2001*

One of the few women executed requested a Supreme pizza, garden salad with ranch dressing, pickled okra, strawberry shortcake, cherry limeade.



Figure 7: plate: 10 x 10 in., *Arkansas 2 May 2000*

A Texas menu caught my attention:



Figure 8: plate: 9 x 9 in., *Texas 26 June 2001, Chocolate birthday cake with "2/23/90" written on top; 7 pink candles;...[and assorted fruit].*

I ponder this request for cake decorated with the date of 23 February 1990 and seven pink candles. What did that day symbolize to an inmate who spent twenty-two years on death row? The year 1990 came around during the time he was in prison: eleven years after being locked up, and eleven years prior to execution—1990 marks the halfway point. The most obvious guess is the date represents an eleven-year-old girl's birthday. But perhaps the

date has no special meaning to the inmate. Perhaps it is a test to see if prison staff would make the extra effort on his behalf. Perhaps the inmate was born again on this date. His final words do speak of love and God: "Stop the violence. Let my death change society. You don't need the death penalty. We need more loving fathers and mothers."⁷ Whatever 23 February 1990 symbolizes, the request is a good example of the personal meaning foods have for all people. We can analyze, we can guess, but we will not know for certain what specific foods mean to the condemned—with their execution goes the answer.

Substitutions

There are inconsistencies among prison, newspaper, and online records of final meals. There are also discrepancies between what is requested and what is served, although substitutions are rarely noted. For instance, the Texas Department of Corrections records the inmate's request but makes no mention of menu changes by the prison. Brian Price, the death-row chef, notes requests are limited to foods on hand in the Texas prison pantry, and unusual requests such as catfish, liver, chitterlings, and eggplant are usually not provided unless a chaplain brings in the item. Since prison and media records make no mention of substitutions, readers assume requests are filled. I asked historian Daniel Rosenberg for his reflections on final meals:

It is very tempting to read records of last meals as requests. From one perspective, they undoubtedly are, and in some cases, there is an evident pleasure associated with not only the particular foods named but with their combination: some of these texts express unity, others dissonance; some draw upon vernaculars of speech and taste in surprising ways. Still, as I read them, I am most struck by their expressive inertia. Consider the following remarkable case: "In 1990, an inmate, in cynicism, requested dirt. Instead of dirt, he received yogurt."⁸ There are two notable things about this text. First is the request itself. According to the famous formulation of Mary Douglas, dirt is matter out of place. And it is hard to think of matter more out of place than food before the condemned. But in our cultural order, food is the very thing that defines the space of execution, and so the request for non-food here appears an attack on the space itself as, in effect, an attempt at escape. Second, the notion that such a statement could be interpreted as cynicism is an attempt to render legible something that barely is, as is the presentation of yogurt, non-food rendered in the native language of the last meal. In classical philosophy, a cynic is an ascetic. But, in this context, such an interpretation would be even more out of place than the request itself.⁹

The Texas request, below, was significantly altered. Inmate's writing is on the left and Department of Corrections revisions on the right:

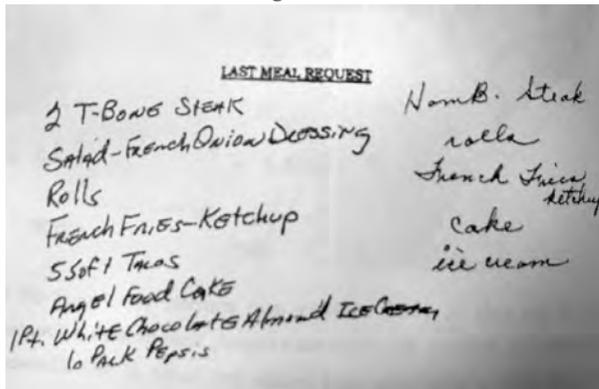


Figure 9: Last Meal Request for Inmate TDCJ 93, executed 5 January 1999, Texas Department of Corrections (image provided by Brian Price)

Another request begins with twenty-four soft shell tacos, instead that inmate was served four hard shell tacos. His two cheeseburgers were omitted.¹⁰ A request for wild game becomes a cheeseburger and fries.¹¹ One inmate requested his meal be given to a homeless man, request denied.

Consumption

Final meal procedures, as well as request allowances, vary from state to state. Prisoners are often provided with special last meal utensils so they cannot injure themselves. Many times the inmate dines alone. In some states prison staff or a spiritual advisor may share a meal or sit with the condemned while he or she eats.

Looking at requests for Diet Coke, one cannot help but wonder about the uselessness of calorie counting. In this case, Diet Coke must be a taste preference. Requests for Roloids have questionable value for digestion of the final meal, as they will have little time to be effective. But the Roloids might help settle stomach pain due to high anxiety.

The massive quantity of food ordered by some inmates is striking. On a normal day, it would be a feat for a hearty eater to consume it all. On execution day, how hungry would we be? I am a champion eater, yet can't imagine consuming much a few hours before execution. This was the case for Karla Fay Tucker. She didn't touch her meal. It came back to the kitchen still in plastic wrap and covered in butcher paper.¹² In 1992, Ricky Ray Rector, a brain-damaged inmate from Arkansas, saved half of his pecan pie to enjoy after his execution. Recently the country followed inmate Stanley "Tookie" Williams's last days in California. He refused the option of a special meal, eating nothing but oatmeal and milk. Larry Todd, from the Texas Department of Corrections, says, "Some eat heartily and others scantily."¹³

Nationally, about ninety-five percent of death row inmates take advantage of their choice and order a personal meal selection. There are no statistics available on the quantity of food consumed. Whatever is eaten is not a life-sustaining meal. Pathologist autopsy reports reveal food will not have time to be digested prior to execution.

Purpose of Final Meals

Americans love the spectacle from the time of public hangings to the present. If death penalty executions were televised, people would watch.

Samuel Pepys stated it is "strange to see how a good dinner and feasting reconciles everybody." Swedish artist Mats Bigert thinks the contemporary American practice of a final meal has an aspect of forgiveness to it. It may be a way of saying, "We don't like it, but we have to do this."¹⁴

An Oklahoma prison staff member explained the meal choice serves as "motivation for good behavior." The prisoner, like a young child, is offered an enticement. If you behave and do not make a scene about your imminent execution, you will be rewarded with a nice supper.

I believe another purpose of the final meal is to help alleviate the guilt of prison workers. It must be a difficult job to carry out an execution. I have heard about wardens against capital punishment who would quit their job before overseeing an execution at their prison. Yet another warden oversaw a number of executions of male inmates, but said he would quit rather than execute a woman. For the wardens and staff who process executions, providing a last supper shifts the focus from the execution to a kind gesture they provide the condemned.

Food offers strength and energy, health, comfort, ritual, and pleasure in our lives. Speaking of *The Last Supper* project, curator Deborah Gangwer mentioned the significance and sacredness to food in all cultures. She continued, "We, as non-inmates, have a great deal of choice every day in what we eat. For the first time in perhaps years, and for the very last time, inmates are given a choice, a menu choice."¹⁵

In a few states, a last meal includes family members. Mothers sometimes accompany their offspring through the death penalty procedure. In 1998, a Texas inmate declined the option of selection for a special meal but, "at the last minute he decided to eat a hamburger at his mother's request."¹⁶

At least one mother cooked a last supper.



Figure 10: plate: 9 x 7 in., *Indiana 14 March 2001, German ravioli and chicken dumplings prepared by his mother and prison dietary staff.*

There is No Blue Food

A passion for food and a strong anti-death penalty stance led me to the final meal project. To date, *The Last Supper* project consists of 283 mineral-painted plates illustrating final meal requests of United States death row inmates, and a video collaboration with Colin Murphey. Each state with capital punishment executions since 1976 is represented in the plates.

I paint about fifty new plates a year. Completed plates roughly parallel the execution ratio per state: Texas has the most plates in *The Last Supper* and in life, followed by Virginia and Oklahoma. The plates are a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Some are new, some are used, some are Martha Stewart brand. They are all cobalt blue mineral paint applied to white pre-fired ceramics. Technical advisor Toni Acock fires each plate at 1400 degrees.

As I spend long days in the back garden painting plates, many thoughts go through my head. I think about the terrible crimes committed. I think about the victims. I think about fair punishment. I think about the margin for error in the judicial process. I think about litigation and that a death penalty conviction costs more than life without parole. I paint each menu as a meditation, not unlike *retablo* painting. I think about the food I am painting. When working long hours, items being painted sometimes make me hungry. I crave the cantaloupe I paint. I am ashamed to admit this, yet it speaks to the power of food for us all.

Until 2003, I was unaware of others' work on the topic. A number of artists address the final meal, using a wide range of materials and techniques. Celia Shapiro recreates the final meal on a bright plastic food tray and photographs it. In her book *Last Meal*, Jacquelyn C Black also recreates and photographs meals. Richard Kamler

fashions final meals out of lead, producing a lead apple, a lead hamburger. Artists Erik Strom and Steve Bowden collaborated to produce 310 food trays of Last Meals from Texas's death row. These artists all include the inmates' names. Out of respect for their privacy, *The Last Supper* plates omit the inmates' name, but they do specify the state and the date of execution.

Since 2002, exhibitions of *The Last Supper* are accompanied by a Comment Book in which viewers can record their thoughts. From the three hundred viewers' comments at Copia, the following are consecutive responses on one page from 26 October 2002:

Your message is very powerful.

May the last supper be served soon.

One can not take even one life with diminishing our humanity as a society.

Forget the meals- Fry 'em as soon as possible!

I agree.

Frequently viewers will respond to the comment directly above. In another page of Copia comments, one can imagine those traveling together, as well as those clearly not:

Love to look better to dine!

Such fun dinner conversation.

Go back to Oregon, you stinky HIPPIE!

I am glad Copia provides a forum for conscious discussion/ art about social justice. We can not continue to live in a society blind to economic, racial etc. oppression. The Last Supper is very powerful and thought-provoking. Such consciousness hopefully deflates some of the hate illustrated by the previous comment. Peace.

Dialogue among these viewers takes on a life of its own. Many comments are not about final meals. They are conversations on capital punishment between strangers, coming and going, who at some point stood in the same place on the same day.

The question of what you would have for your final meal seems to have replaced the question of what book you would bring to a desert island. In the Sunday *New York Times* recently there were two separate interviews in which celebrities were asked what they would have for a final meal. Wildly, both said black cod in miso from Nobu's in New York. It does make one want to taste this black cod. Black cod and miso is not kept in the prison pantry, so most states would not provide this dish, if requested.

The Last Supper has pathos. I am upbeat, and death row is not. In this ongoing project, several times I have nearly quit. In Tulsa recently, a woman came up to me at the opening of *The Last Supper* at Living Arts. She said she was a Republican and, until that day, solidly pro-death penalty. Looking at the exhibition, she decided to reverse her position, and to be against capital punishment. In such moments, the project seems positive.

I plan to continue painting plates until we no longer have capital punishment. I hope to see the last supper served.

Thank you to The Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University and to Daniel Cottom, Clay Lohmann, and Roger Shimomura for their support.

NOTES

1 Euan Ferguson, "Last Orders," *The Observer*, 14 March 2004. <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/foodmonthly/story/0,,1166252,00.html>

2 Helen Prejean, CSJ, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1993), 87.

3 Helen Prejean, CSJ, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* (New York: Random House, 2005), 4-7.

4 Jennifer Hickey, "Dining In With Capital Punishment- last meals of condemned prisoners," 28 May 2001. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_20_17/ai_75122078

5 Brian Price, *Meals to Die For* (Dyna-Paige, 2004), 87.

6 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 42.

7 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 449

8 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 21.

9 Daniel Rosenburg, personal communication, fall 2005.

10 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 308.

11 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 295.

12 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 181.

13 Price, *Meals to Die For*, 141.

14 Hickey, "Dining In With Capital Punishment- last meals of condemned prisoners," 28 May 2001. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_20_17/ai_75122078

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