

# Digest

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Review of:

## ***Prison Food In America***

**Erika Camplin. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Studies in Food and Gastronomy, 2017. Pp. 139, index.**

By: Claire Schmidt

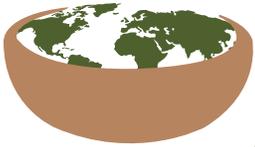
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Erika Camplin's *Prison Food in America* is described on the cover blurb as "a high level snapshot." As a whole, the text is a useful introduction to the study of food in prison. It covers a lot of ground in order to paint a broad picture and address an important topic about which there is no other current scholarly book-length work.

*Prison Food in America* is quite short and very accessible to a general audience and undergraduate students. There are eight chapters comprising 106 pages, plus end note references and an index. The book is very broad in its approach, encompassing history, economics, race, ethics, class, popular culture, politics, and sociology as it explores food in prison in the contemporary United States (with a short glimpse of Norway) as well as historically in both the United States and Great Britain.

The first chapter raises the main concerns of the book: 1) the United States incarcerates its people at a far greater rate than any other nation, meaning that, per Camplin's calculations, the US provides about 6 million meals per day; 2) food, poverty, profit, and race are inextricably linked in American institutions; 3) food lies at the heart of conflicting ideologies about punishment and rehabilitation; and 4) we can and should do better as a nation if we wish to address root causes of poverty, institutional racism, and health inequalities.

Chapter 2 gives a very brief and selective history of prison food in England and the United States. Chapter 3 focuses on the economics of prison food and chapter 4 covers menus, nutritional and safety oversight (or lack thereof), and specialized diets. These two chapters (and chapter 6, on the commissary) make the strongest contribution to prison food scholarship. The reproduced menus, nutritional guidelines, and commissary forms are valuable artifacts and will be quite helpful for future scholars and students. The interrogation of profit, incarceration, and ethics in chapter 3 is timely. Chapter 5 explores food as



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protest and punishment, chapter 7 focuses on the rehabilitative possibilities of food production, and the final chapter explores last meals before executions.

From a scholarly point of view, the methodology is unclear. A great deal of the supporting material comes from blogs, fora, government websites, and online news sources like *Vice*. Some scholarly sources are incorporated into the text, including work by folklorist Steve Siporin and prison food scholar Amy Smoyer, but the balance of the material is populist rather than academic. Folklorists may question the context of some personal experience narratives in the text. For example, references to and quotes from “my inmate friend” pepper the book, but no explanation is provided about the author’s relationship to the inmate friend, why the author has chosen to incorporate this information, how the information was gathered, whether the friend played a role in the overall conception of the book, or how that friend’s experience of prison and prison food may be influenced by his cultural background.

Further, the structure of the book is inconsistent. Some chapters have a clear introductory passage while others do not. One chapter has a formal conclusion section with a header while the other seven chapters just stop without bringing the main ideas together into a concluding section or paragraph. The voice is also unpredictable: some paragraphs are written like a scholarly treatise, while other paragraphs read like a hyperbolic *Buzzfeed* piece. Camplin is generally very careful to avoid othering and essentializing inmates, but the final section of the book on last meals (chapter 8) feels sensationalized, particularly because the chapter, and book, end abruptly on a list of “notorious last meals” and give the reader no conclusion at all to the book as a whole. The concepts and topics often lack synthesis and the primary and secondary sources lack contextualization and critical analysis. As with other books in this series, image quality is inconsistent. More care from the editorial department would likely have resulted in a more functional and effective book.

The text is impassioned and focused on raising awareness of an immediate opportunity for social change for the betterment of the humanity of the entire United States. While I wish it had been longer and more substantial, *Prison Food in America* opens the door for future scholars to respond by engaging deeply with issues brought to the fore in this present volume.