

# THE HAPPY DESK LUNCH

ON EATING IN THE SFA OFFICE

by Sara Camp Arnold



FROM TIME TO TIME I see references on social media to the sad desk lunch, or specifically the sad desk salad. Many office workers, it seems, equate lunch at work with abject disappointment. I've experienced this phenomenon myself. At a certain point, the offerings in our nearby student union lose their luster, as do the microwavable organic burritos that I once loved. Whether it's a salad, a Tupperware of leftover penne, or a six-inch turkey on wheat with processed cheese triangles, a desk meal can be sad. But in my office, this is the exception. More often than not, sharing a snack or meal reminds me why I love my job.

I am lucky to work with a group of people, mostly women, who truly love food and eating. This shouldn't be surprising given our line of work. Our team is small, and we spend a lot of time together. We're all busy, even a little frenzied, much of the time. But we pause to eat together with a frequency that makes me proud. Donuts for breakfast. Midsummer tomato sandwiches for lunch. Pie for—well, pie is for any time of the day. Sometimes our food falls under the general umbrella of healthy. Other times, not so much. Often, the food we share in our office is homemade. But we've also been known to order pizza.

For the last year or so, I've watch SFA director John T. Edge explore his fascination with eating establishments as political spaces, with a particular eye to lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s. Inspired by John

T.'s curiosity, I dedicated this issue of *Gravy* to the theme of "Where We Eat." I wanted to explore themes of space, place, and architecture as they relate to foodways in the contemporary South. No stories of sad desk salads here. Instead, you'll read about an all-American mid-century burger joint that's now an all-American taqueria. You'll visit an oyster house on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and a seventy-year-old sandwich shop in Jackson, Mississippi. You might end up believing, as I do, that where we eat can matter as much as what we eat.

When I moved from Chapel Hill to Oxford to join the SFA, my colleague Julie Pickett greeted me with a Kroger sheet cake on my first day in the office. Written in icing was the slogan, SFA LOVES SCA. I had come to the right place. That cake (and something is probably wrong with you if you don't get a little giddy at the thought of grocery-store sheet cake) was the first of many meals, desserts, and snacks I would share with my colleagues at our desks or gathered on the armchairs and couches in our open office. We gossip, we laugh, we dream up new ideas. And we pass the pimento cheese, the pork noodles, the lemon icebox pie. There's nothing sad about that. 🍷

PHOTO by Mark Steinmetz.