

A vertical stack of bread slices. The top slices are white with a speckled texture, while the bottom slice is solid black. The slices are separated by dark outlines.

NO
SMALL
WONDER

DOES WHITE
BREAD HAVE A
DARK SIDE?

as told toGravy by Aaron Bobrow-Strain

IN MOST BARBECUE RESTAURANTS, white bread serves as a neutral sopper or a foil for sauce-drenched meat. But a new book by Aaron Bobrow-Strain explains that the fluffy stuff is anything but innocuous. Gravy asked Bobrow-Strain some questions about *White Bread: A Social History of the Store Bought Loaf* (Beacon, 2012).

What makes bread—specifically mass-produced loaves of white bread—such an appropriate case study for a discussion of food history and politics in the United States?

When I started this project, I had no idea what an important role bread played in the modern American diet. The country got, on average, 30% of its daily caloric intake from some form of bread—mostly white—from the late nineteenth century until the mid-1960s.

Because it was so essential to so many people, bread became one the country's most fought-over foods. Nearly every social reformer, diet guru, health expert, domestic advisor, military war planner, public health official, and social movement of the past century wanted to change America's bread or its bread habits in some way. So white bread is a great way to explore our nation's long, turbulent love affair with trying to "save the world" by getting people to eat differently.

What was the most surprising fact you discovered while researching *White Bread*?

After WWII, many U.S. officials in occupied Japan believed that, if they could just teach their former enemies to give up rice and adopt white bread as their dietary staple, the Japanese would be more democratic, peaceful, and able to stand up against the threat of Communism. This is an example of something that appears over and over again in the history of white bread: One group's confident idea of what counts as "good food" gets laden with all kinds of political and moral weight—and craziness ensues.

In the debate between white and whole-grain breads, where, if at all, does the iconic Southern cornbread fit in?

During the early twentieth century, most “experts,” and lots of ordinary consumers—even in the South—believed that cornbread was an inferior food. Progressive Era food reformers fanned out all over the South to teach the gospel of modern, “scientific” eating habits to the poor. Preferring cornbread to white-wheat was seen as a sign of backwardness, and many Southerners bought into that logic.

There’s one interesting exception to this story. During WWI, in an effort to conserve wheat for soldiers and allies, the U.S. government launched a massive campaign promoting cornbread consumption. The government put Southern cooks on tour to teach northerners about the joys of cornbread, sponsored seminars on the nutritional virtues of corn, and ran patriotic ads extolling corn as America’s “original food.” For just a moment, cornbread wasn’t portrayed as a threat to the nation’s health, but as essential to it.

As you mention in the book, 2009 was the first year in which sales of wheat bread eclipsed sales of white bread in U.S. grocery stores. Where will white bread be in ten years?

Wonder Bread’s parent company is in bankruptcy proceedings right now—a judge is going to have to decide whether America’s most iconic industrial bread is “Too Fluffy to Fail.” There’s a lot going on in that case, but part of it has to do with a big cultural shift away from industrial white bread. I suspect that people will always want industrial white bread for certain uses (including soaking up barbecue sauce!), but it will continue to fade away over the next ten years. At the same time, thanks to massive and growing inequality in the United States, the larger social divides epitomized by industrial white bread’s lowly status today will continue unless we do something about it. We have a polarized food system that produces healthy, high-quality food mostly for the wealthy and garbage for the rest. The history of battles over white bread suggests that changing this mess will require more than just “voting with our forks” or “helping” the poor make better choices. 🍷

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