

Last supper: Our obvious associations with phrases like the “Last Supper” and last meals certainly start with the Christian Easter celebration and Holy Week, marking the gathering of Jesus Christ and his disciples. I am not going to opine on any of the religious issues here as it impacts the idea of last meals, death row, whether capital punishment is okay, Christian or anything else. I literally only want to talk about food tonight.

We’ve all likely seen Da Vinci’s Last Supper. It depicts Christ and his 12 disciples (I will refrain from calling the Baker’s Dozen) sitting on one side of a rectangular table gathering for a meal. The mural was painted between 1495 and 1498. The work portrays the evening as told in the Gospel of **John 13:21**, NIV: "After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, 'Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.'" We all know how that is reported to have ended.

What did they eat? The Christian canon would tell us there was obviously wine and bread. I’m not going to say there have not been times where that is literally what I’ve had for dinner (pretzels and cheese plus wine or beer have also happened), but let’s not assume that Christ, knowing he’s on death row, is not only having *only* wine and bread for dinner, but effectively serving himself for dinner, metaphorically or otherwise.

A bean stew, lamb, olives, bitter herbs, a fish sauce, unleavened bread, dates and aromatized wine likely were on the menu at the Last Supper, says recent research into Palestinian cuisine during Jesus's time.

The food wasn't eaten during a formal seated gathering at a rectangular table, as shown in many religious art paintings (see: Tintoretto, and literally every other renaissance artist), but with Jesus and his apostles reclining on floor cushions, as the Romans did at that time.

The study by two Italian archaeologists relied on Bible verses, Jewish writings, ancient Roman works and archaeological data to investigate the eating habits in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 1st century A.D.

"The Bible discusses what happened during that dinner, but it doesn't detail what Jesus and his 12 dining companions ate,"

"The starting point is the assumption that Jesus was a Jew. He and his disciples observed the traditions transmitted by the Torah and its food related bans," Generoso Urciuoli, an archaeologist at Italy’s Petrie Center said.

Commemorated today by Christians, the Last Supper is the final meal that, according to the Gospel, Jesus shared with his closest disciples in Jerusalem hours before he was turned over by Judas to Roman soldiers and crucified.

The scene was immortalized by Leonardo Da Vinci, but the masterpiece, one of the world's most famous and powerful paintings, isn't historically accurate, according to Urciuoli.

"Leonardo's mural derives from centuries of iconographic codes. Embodying the sacrament of the eucharist, the Last Supper has a very strong symbolic meaning and this does not help the historical reconstruction," Urciuoli said.

Putting together historical data and clues from artworks such as third century A.D. catacombs paintings, the researchers were able to reconstruct food and eating habits in Palestine 2,000 years ago.

The picture that emerges is completely different from traditional renderings of the Last Supper. The dinner, which happened on the upper room of a house in Jerusalem, wasn't a seated gathering at a rectangular table.

"At that time in Palestine, food was placed on low tables and guests ate in reclining position on floor cushions and carpets," Urciuoli said.

Urciuoli and Berogno narrowed the search for the food present at the Last Supper by reconstructing two other important meals mentioned in the New Testament, the wedding at Cana, which records the water to wine miracle, and Herod's banquet, famous for the beheading of John the Baptist.

But according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus prepared for the Last Supper on the "first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb."

If the Last Supper was a Passover dinner, held by Jews then as now to commemorate the exodus from Egypt, the meal would have likely included lamb.

Scripture provides us with another clue: unleavened bread and wine were also on the menu. Jesus broke bread and blessed wine, telling his Apostles that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood — thus laying the basis for the communion.

According to Urciuoli and Berogno, other food on the table would have included cholent, a stewed dish of beans cooked very low and slow, olives with hyssop, a herb with a mint-like taste, bitter herbs with pistachios and a date charoset, a chunky fruit and nut paste.

"Bitter herbs and charoset are typical of Passover, cholent is eaten during festivities, while hyssop was also consumed on a daily basis," Urciuoli said.

All of this said, something that I am interested in and will carry over into the other issues here, is the idea, theoretically, that Jesus *knew* this was his last meal.

Is that important?

Death Row: The death row last meal is more than 2,000 years old, dating back to Christ. But in recent years, some states have abandoned the tradition. What do inmates deserve? And why does the idea of a last meal still fascinate us? Part of it has to do with focusing on the mundane in times of turmoil and upheaval. How many of you took to baking bread while the world burned with the corona virus?

Two chicken-fried steaks with gravy and onions. One triple-patty bacon cheeseburger. An omelete with cheese, ground beef, tomatoes, onions, bell peppers, and jalapeños. Fried okra with ketchup. A pound of barbecued meat with a half loaf of white bread. Three fajitas. A meat lover's pizza. A pint of Blue Bell ice cream. Peanut butter fudge with crushed peanuts. Three root beers.

This is the last meal that Lawrence Brewer requested before he was executed in 2011. Brewer had been convicted of murdering James Byrd Jr. in a vicious hate crime in 1998 in Jasper, Texas, in which he and two other men dragged Byrd behind a truck until he was decapitated. After ordering his extravagant final meal, Brewer refused to eat any of it. He was executed by lethal injection shortly thereafter.

In part because of Brewer's decision not to eat, Texas no longer offers specially prepared last meals to death row inmates. According to Reuters, most states still do. It was surprisingly easy to reverse the policy, which was instituted in 1924 — all it took was [a letter to state prison officials from state Senator John Whitmire](#). He argued that Brewer's decision to order such a lavish meal only to eat none of it was a statement, a final act of control over the prison system. (Whitmire did not reply to requests for comment.) That act complicates the last meal convention: Do death row inmates deserve a tradition of this kind? And where did it come from?

Of course, the details of the Last Supper and last meals do not match perfectly: Jesus had not been imprisoned and his last feast was a Passover meal. Still, says Sarah Gerwig-Moore, an associate professor of law at Mercer University and formerly the senior appellate supervising attorney at the Georgia Public Defender Council, the modern conception of the last meal likely does appropriate some aspects of the Last Supper. She has found there to be a high correlation between deeply Christian states and those with high execution rates.

"The most generous meals correlate to the states that execute the most people — except for Texas," Gerwig-Moore says.

In Meyer's study, she points out that in modern times, there is likely a reconciliation happening: "Last meals may be an offering by the guards and prison administrators as a

way of seeking forgiveness for the impending execution, signaling that 'it's nothing personal.'"

"There are very few things to look forward to for people on death row," she says. "People talk about their last meals years in advance — it's sort of a conversation starter among prisoners."

It's a conversation starter for those of us outside the prison system, too. It's a popular interview query for celebrities. But the way we talk about last meals, Gerwig-Moore found, changes when one is actually coming. Then, it becomes a chance to comfort and maybe even explain oneself.

"I was really struck by the lessons we learn in class differences. In celebrity interviews, the last meal answer is always something very exotic or expensive, like, *Oh lobster and champagne!* Or something like that," she says. "But what we found in last meal requests of people on death row showed a lot about class, and who is on death row — poor people, for the most part." She says items like Burger King Whoppers are typical. "Class is an interesting topic. I want to tell you about my favorite last meal story of all time.

Francois Mitterrand: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5223077>

François Mitterrand, the former French president, gorged himself on one last orgiastic feast before he died. For his last meal, he'd ate oysters and foie gras and capon—all in copious quantities—the succulent, tender, sweet tastes flooding his parched mouth. And then there was the meal's ultimate course: a small, yellow-throated songbird that was illegal to eat. Rare and seductive, the bird—ortolan—supposedly represented the French soul. The male Ortolan Bunting. A 2 oz songbird. The bunting summers in western Europe and winters in Africa. It is a tiny, golden songbird. They are captured, and kept in the dark so they will gorge themselves on grain and figs. They are then drowned and simultaneously marinated in Armagnac—the slightly less famous cousin to Cognac, both are French brandy, the only difference is geography and grape variety. Anyway, the bird it plucked and roasted and then eaten whole, bones and all. And this old man, this ravenous president, had taken it whole—wings, feet, liver, heart. Swallowed it, bones and all.

Here's the key part. This delicacy is so aromatic, so indulgent, so barbaric that one consumes it with a towel or napkin over their head. Some will tell you that is done to keep the aromas trapped as you eat it. The more romantic story is that you eat it with a napkin over your head so that God Himself couldn't witness the barbaric act.

Ortolan is literally the thing I want most to eat.

They are worth up to a hundred dollars each and each no bigger than a thumb. They're brown-backed, with pinkish bellies, part of the yellowhammer family, and when they fly, they tend to keep low to the ground and, when the wind is high, swoop crazily for lack of weight. In all the world, they're really caught only in the pine forests of the southwestern Landes region of France, by about twenty families who lay in wait for the birds each fall as they fly from Europe to Africa. French kings and Roman emperors once blinded the bird with a knife so, lost in the darkness, it would eat twenty-four hours a day.

It's plucked. It's put into a little dish, a cassoulet, and it's salted and peppered, and it's put in the oven, and then comes straight from the oven to the table, and then lays before you in the cassoulet and you lift it with your fingers. And some people will eat the head, and in my case I did not eat the head, but bit the head off and left it on the plate. People typically will eat it under a white napkin. And part of it is to create a little capsule for yourself so that all of the aromas and tastes are captured in the space before you. But also people traditionally ate beneath the cloth napkin because they didn't want to have God see them eating these little songbirds.

Truly an aristocratic atrocity.

Speaking of the aristocracy, I want to segue to the question I had Paul send you this week. Thank you for answering. Before I do that, I want to tell you a joke. Well, I want to tell you about a joke.

It's an old vaudeville joke. It's a joke many people know the punchline to because the point of the joke is to include as many disgusting, taboo, off-color references as possible.

I think comedy is truly the highest of all art forms. I, as a disgusting human being, think that among types of comedy, "dick and fart" jokes are the funniest types of jokes. Amongst comedians, there is a joke. A joke they tell after hours. A joke that is only the same in one way: the punchline. The purpose of the joke is to tell it for as long as possible. The other purpose is to tell the most over-the-top, disgusting, grotesque possible version of the joke. The premise is that a gentleman goes to a talent agent to find work for his family act. The talent agent asks the father to describe his family act which he proceeds to do...this is the narrative of the joke. It is then a rant of sexual, scatological, incestuous, beastiality-laden, curse filled narrative that ends with the talent agent saying, "that's an interesting act, what do you call yourselves?"

"The aristocrats."

There is a terrific documentary about the joke directed by Penn Gillette. The coup de gras is universally believed to be Gilbert Gottfried's version of the joke told at the roast of Hugh Hefner in 2001 just a few after the 9/11 attacks. It is disgusting. Gottfried was the

closer of the roast, was not planning to tell it, and went on an eleven-minute, filth-rant that may have made Hugh Hefner blush.

So, I've been talking about food, murder, the barbaric consumption of a whole song bird, what does this have to do with bathroom humor? Well, now that I think about it, that all kind of adds up, but in all seriousness, Chefs have their own version of what I've described above and its the question I put to all of you earlier this week. Chefs talk about their last meals, the setting, the participants, the food. Etc. It's a thing I've been particularly interested in since 2007 or so. There is a NY based photographer named Melanie Dunea who has released a pair of portrait books of chefs with them responding in interview to the very questions I asked of you this week. Whether it's a fully nude Anthony Bourdain (bone marrow, parsley, etc) with a cigarette in one hand and a massive cattle bone obscuring his sex organs, an adorable photo of and angelically attired Rachel Ray in front of a backdrop of Magritte-inspired clouds, or Daniel Boloud literally standing in front of the palace at Versailles.

What strikes me is everyone want to have their meal with friends, family and loved ones. It happens that some of these folks friends and loved ones are also world-famous chefs. Some of them want multi-course meals all over the world with famous dead people playing music. Some want to prepare the meal themselves.

The question of class certainly comes in again here, but as Beth and I were talking about this last night, we thought about it...many of these world famous chefs...and I don't mean TV chefs, I mean \$500 a plate, you know who they are if you are a "foodie" and then only *maybe*...their friends are their colleagues. Their friends are also world famous chefs.

Some of you probably want your mom's lasagna, or your child's sourdough bread. Some of you may want a meal at your childhood home, and much of that is also what certain death row inmates are looking for. Class is certainly an issue, but food is a commonality for all of us—Murderers, Messiahs, and guys who tell dirty jokes alike...