



# Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal

*Abigail Carroll*

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We are what we eat, as the saying goes, but we are also how we eat, and when, and where. Our eating habits reveal as much about our society as the food on our plates, and our national identity is written in the eating schedules we follow and the customs we observe at the table and on the go.

In *Three Squares*, food historian Abigail Carroll upends the popular understanding of our most cherished mealtime traditions, revealing that our eating habits have never been stable—far from it, in fact. The eating patterns and ideals we’ve inherited are relatively recent inventions, the products of complex social and economic forces, as well as the efforts of ambitious inventors, scientists and health gurus. Whether we’re pouring ourselves a bowl of cereal, grabbing a quick sandwich, or congregating for a family dinner, our mealtime habits are living artifacts of our collective history—and represent only the latest stage in the evolution of the American meal. Our early meals, Carroll explains, were rustic affairs, often eaten hastily, without utensils, and standing up. Only in the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution upset work schedules and drastically reduced the amount of time Americans could spend on the midday meal, did the shape of our modern “three squares” emerge: quick, simple, and cold breakfasts and lunches and larger, sit-down dinners. Since evening was the only part of the day when families could come together, dinner became a ritual—as American as apple pie. But with the rise of processed foods, snacking has become faster, cheaper, and easier than ever, and many fear for the fate of the cherished family meal as a result.

The story of how the simple gruel of our forefathers gave way to snack fixes and fast food, *Three Squares* also explains how Americans’ eating habits may change in the years to come. Only by understanding the history of the American meal can we help determine its future.

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