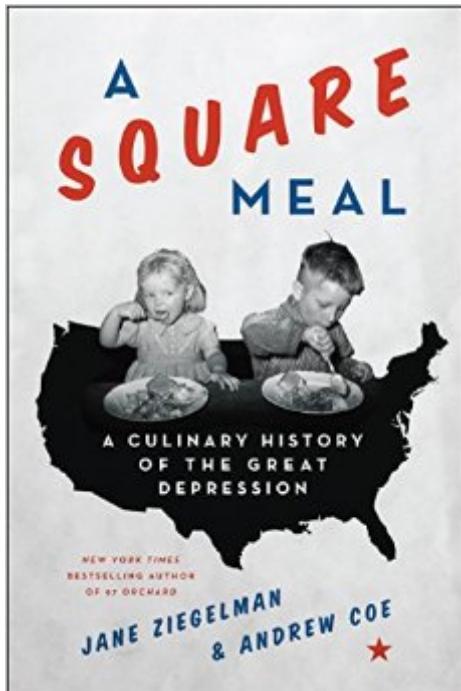


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# A Square Meal: A Culinary History Of The Great Depression



## Synopsis

From the author of the acclaimed *97 Orchard* and her husband, a culinary historian, an in-depth exploration of the greatest food crisis the nation has ever faced—“the Great Depression”—and how it transformed America’s culinary culture. The decade-long Great Depression, a period of shifts in the country’s political and social landscape, forever changed the way America eats. Before 1929, America’s relationship with food was defined by abundance. But the collapse of the economy, in both urban and rural America, left a quarter of all Americans out of work and undernourished—shattering long-held assumptions about the limitlessness of the national larder. In 1933, as women struggled to feed their families, President Roosevelt reversed long-standing biases toward government-sponsored food charity. • For the first time in American history, the federal government assumed, for a while, responsibility for feeding its citizens. The effects were widespread. Championed by Eleanor Roosevelt, • home economists • who had long fought to bring science into the kitchen rose to national stature. Tapping into America’s long-standing ambivalence toward culinary enjoyment, they imposed their vision of a sturdy, utilitarian cuisine on the American dinner table. Through the Bureau of Home Economics, these women led a sweeping campaign to instill dietary recommendations, the forerunners of today’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans. At the same time, rising food conglomerates introduced packaged and processed foods that gave rise to a new American cuisine based on speed and convenience. This movement toward a homogenized national cuisine sparked a revival of American regional cooking. In the ensuing decades, the tension between local traditions and culinary science has defined our national cuisine—a battle that continues today. *A Square Meal* examines the impact of economic contraction and environmental disaster on how Americans ate then—and the lessons and insights those experiences may hold for us today. *A Square Meal* features 25 black-and-white photographs.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

You might imagine a culinary history of the Great Depression would be a catalog of cheap and skimpy meals, but having read previous works by Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe, I knew I'd be in for a social history with all the trimmings. I was not disappointed. *A Square Meal* chronicles American diets in the early 20th century, tells the history of hoboes in America (and the important differences between hoboes and tramps and bums), touches on the popularization of canned and frozen foods, and gets into the surprising politics of feeding (and not feeding) the unemployed during the Depression. Sprinkled throughout are recipes and photographs and intriguing stories, and what runs just below the surface is that we are not so very far removed from the Thirties. The attitudes toward people using food stamps (which were introduced in that decade) were not charitable -- there was a suspicion in the White House among FDR's cabinet (and perhaps FDR himself) that people accepting handouts would suffer low morale from the experience. Evidently they thought that was a fate worse than actually starving to death, something that happened with grim regularity. But the false economy of letting people starve came back to roost when the Army had to disqualify half of the draftees it examined due to poor health, much of which was directly attributable to poor nutrition. Fascinating social history, highly recommended! (Thanks to HarperCollins and Edelweiss for a digital review copy.)

There is an old saying, "You are what you eat." American eating habits reflect our nation throughout its history. This fascinating study of Americans' diet takes the reader from the 19th-century farm through changes wrought by the move to the cities, World War I, and the beginnings of the disciplines of nutrition science, home economics, technology in the food industry and kitchen, media influences, through the social upheaval that was the Great Depression, ending at that next great turning point, World War II. The writing is clear and lively and the scholarship impeccably thorough. I can't wait for the authors' next installment.

When one pairs the Great Depression and what Americans ate during those years, a reader could infer that this book might be a dull compilation of facts and figures from that time. The more than

pleasant surprise is that authors Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe have given us a book of sheer delight. Covering those years between the two World Wars, we discover not only what Americans ate but how they did and how many of them managed with the bleakest of monetary assets. "A Square Meal" gets into the political side of feeding a nation...from the Hoover administration's great reluctance to offer public food relief to the turnabout when Franklin Roosevelt became president. In fact, the book's most charming moments come when the authors describe the Roosevelt's housekeeper, Henrietta Nesbitt, who kept the president (and White House Guests) in great yearning for tastier meals, to put it mildly. The menus offered in the book are wonderful in their mirrored timeliness. And it ends with the introduction of frozen foods, which opened many eyes to the new possibilities of food consumption. "A Square Meal" is insightful, humorous and educational. I highly recommend it.

NPR recommended book. I enjoyed reading it and the sad history of food and the unavailability of it during the years that were highlighted in the book. Some of the scenarios in the 1920's about busy family life in the city and turning to prepared meals sounds like 2016.

An interesting account of how hunger, and poverty in general, were dealt with during the Great Depression of the 1930s in terms of public policy and within families. The only criticism is that the book just seemed to end with the full-employment that resulted from World War II. I had hoped that the authors would provide some analysis and prescription for how to deal with current and future issues of poverty and hunger in the U.S., but that was lacking.

I was surprised at the honest and objective examination of the politicians involved in the lead-up to and duration of the great depression. This book is not about the causes of the depression, nor the people to blame for the continuation and worsening of it, but about the role of food in the greater scheme of American life of the era. The examination of all walks and classes of people, the geographical differences, and technological advances were crossed with the times and tribulations of Americans to provide a very interesting, and compelling look at our ancestors' daily lives and struggles. The only complaint I can think of is that this is not a temporally linear read; for sake of storytelling, chapter-to-chapter does not necessarily follow a straight timeline. But, this is a trivial matter and I am not the editor or storyteller. This is a book I'd recommend to history buffs, depression era buffs, fans of Americana, foodies and bored people.

This book should be required reading for every high school student. It was an excellent overview of how the supplemental nutrition program began in the United States and how our relationship with food and cooking evolved. Very easy to read.

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