

# Book Review

Aaron Bobrow-Strain's masterly narrative *White Bread: A Social History* tells a vast story with insight and clarity. As he writes in an early chapter, "I began to understand that dreams of good bread and fears of bad bread are not innocent. They channel much bigger social concerns."



Bakery at the Masonic Home for Children at Oxford  
(North Carolina)

The author's deep investigation into the history behind a single loaf of white

bread reinforces what Mark Kurlansky (author of *Cod* and *Salt*) once write about the genre: "Food is about agriculture, about ecology, about man's relationship with nature, about the climate, about nation-building, cultural struggles, friends and enemies, alliances, wars, religion. It is about memory and tradition and, at times, even about sex." Here is the question the author poses up front:

Among its two dozen ingredients, the loaf on my desk contains diammonium phosphate, a yeast nutrient and flame retardant produced when ammonia and phosphoric acid react. Is this stuff even food? Be careful how you answer that question.

At its inception, white bread was about taste, but it was also about enrichment. After the terrible deprivations of the Great Depression, the concept of a sharp-looking load of bread that gave every child who ate it the vitamins and minerals a body needed was

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White bread was also wrapped up in Americans' sense of their country's exceptional place in the world

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magnetic. Then, beyond enrichment, the loaf of white bread was positioned as a tool used to "civilize" the Japanese after WWII. Our bread was a constant reminder, or proof, of the superiority of America's modern, industrial democracy: much better than those peasant Soviet dark breads.

You can see a great deal of Bobrow-Strain's arc and intentions in his table of contents:

*Introduction*

1. *Untouched by Human Hands: Dreams of Purity and Contagion*
2. *The Invention of Sliced Bread: Dreams of Control and Abundance*
3. *The Staff of Death: Dreams of Health and Discipline*
4. *Vitamin Bread Boot Camp: Dreams of Strength and Defense*
5. *White Bread Imperialism: Dreams of Peace and Security*
6. *How White Bread Became White Trash: Dreams of Resistance and Status*

*Conclusion: Beyond Good Bread*

Domestically, the invention of sliced bread (in Chillicothe, Missouri, in 1928) was “really the culmination of a long process in which bread was engineered and designed to look like a streamlined wonder, like an edible piece of modern art,” Bobrow-Strain writes. As factory automation, companies like Tip Top and Wonder Bread, and a nationwide highway-based distribution system combined to bring identical loaves of white bread to grocery stores in every American city and town, white bread became a symbol of industrialization and modernity.

Norman Borlaug's remarkable Green Revolution – that great man's development of hybrid wheat and rice and corn on the Mexican *bajío* in the 1950's – lent rocket-power to white bread. Borlaug gave farmers everywhere the power to plant hybrid wheat at many times the per-acre productivity of native or land races. Borlaug's new, hybrid crops were disease-resistant and short-stalked, to resist storms. They became so successful that millions who might have starved had food. But the hybrids were expensive to plant and grow and harvest. Flaws in the Green Revolution – more accurately, in the system that financed and cultivated them -- seemed to aggravate poverty, deepen the class divide, and harm the ecology.

White bread became part of the problem. In a sort of backlash, the modern industrial loaf fell into disfavor, both as a symbol as well as dietary fibre. The counterculture movement turned on white bread, seeing it “as an emblem of everything that was wrong with America. It was plastic, corporate, stale,” according to Bobrow-Strain. Eating handmade, whole wheat breads became “an edible act of rebellion, a way of challenging The

Man.” Today, we prefer to see artisanal breads taking the place of industrialized loaves on our supermarket shelves. Food activism has turned bread into a high-end specialty product as well as everyman’s staple.

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**Bernard MacFadden ... thought that modern white bread was sapping the “vital energy” of the white race.**

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Bobrow-Strain writes well – smart but not scholarly, immediate and open. He covered a tremendous amount of territory just to research this century-long story:

Uncovering bread’s place in American society required wide-ranging and creative detective work. My sources range from the letters of early twentieth-century food reformers to the records of Allied occupation forces in postwar Japan (detailing how teaching Japanese schoolchildren to eat white bread would improve their “democratic spirit”). Finding this material took me to far-flung libraries and archives where I read the personal papers of social reformers, advertising executives, food scientists, and industrial designers as well as the records of numerous government agencies. I traced the early history of industrial baking at the Brooklyn and New York historical societies ... then I pored over more than a hundred years of bread advertisements and women’s magazine advice columns.

The effort was well worth it to his readers. *White Bread: A Social History* is a good story told with conscience. You will no doubt find yourself (as I have) going back to it again and again, especially when eating that turkey sandwich.