wonders what it will mean to keep participating in American culture that continues to integrate Chinese food and bodies, while familiar foods at home in China give way to McDonald’s. The impossibility of returning home signifies the ever-routing world, and Chen mentions new forms of Chinese and Chinese American food appearing in both homes. Providing the story behind our culinary landscape, Chop Suey, USA prepares us to continue tracing the relation between Chinese food and global power.

—Stephanie H. Chan, University of California, Santa Cruz

Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal
Abigail Carroll
xvii + 304 pp. Illustrations. $27.99 (hardcover)

“Get your elbows off the table!”; “Don’t hold your fork that way!”; or, when I was young, “Eat like a real person!” Generations of American children have been raised on such reprimands. With Abigail Carroll’s new work, Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal, scolded children can now cogently argue that “real” people throughout American history have not observed such manners. In fact, the form of our meals, and the rituals enforced while consuming them, are sociocultural inventions of the last century. They have been shaped by our changing economy, efforts at class distinction, and children ate elsewhere. It was a time to sate hunger hastily, and only rarely seated. Most of all, they were unsocial. Men may have sat at a makeshift table, but women and children ate elsewhere. It was a time to sate hunger rather than cohere as a family, and there was little conversation. Only after the Industrial Revolution did families begin to eat together around a common table. And only with the Industrial Revolution was the day’s dominant meal moved to the evening, to accommodate workers who could not return home midday for a significant meal.

I ideological changes accompanied the economic shifts that transformed American diets. In every era, food values are shaped by a desire for distinction. Early American settlers distinguished their fixed mealtimes from Native Americans’ grazing. Middle- and upper-class Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries aped French and English customs, often with elaborate rules, to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. This was particularly important after the Industrial Revolution, when physical and social mobility made it more difficult to discern the class backgrounds of others. “Etiquette,” Carroll (pp.88–89) explains, “existed largely to demarcate social boundaries . . . [and] helped to distinguish the elegantly civilized from the folksy and unrefined.” Unlike other markers of class status, “the complexity and subtlety of social decorum became hard to counterfeit” and thus was a reliable tool for distinction.

Changing health ideologies have also accompanied shifts in the American diet. For example, as workers looked to lighter, faster breakfasts as they rushed out the door, nutritionists began calling for light, grain-based diets. Marketers quickly adopted health-based advertising strategies. Charles W. Post, of Post Foods fame, used “sensational testimonies . . . [of] medical conditions the cereal had allegedly improved or even cured” to sell Grape-Nuts, while Sylvester Graham famously preached vegetarianism and an all-around bland diet for health. When companies realized that providing a hot lunch could boost workers’ efficiency, ideologies of health laced the rationale: not only was a hot lunch better for efficiency, it was better for digestion. Throughout the book, Carroll’s storytelling reveals a complex interplay between economic changes, health concerns, and the desire for distinction that has shaped American meals.

The last two chapters of Three Squares shift dramatically in tone, away from the historical narrative to alarm about the contemporary American diet. Carroll warns that the decline in family dinners is harming our health and our children’s intellects. She seemingly forgets the lesson of the first seven sections of the book: that beliefs about the “right” way to eat are complex and ever-changing, and there is no single answer to the correct way to eat.

The final, forward-looking chapter paints a quixotic picture of how readers can actively create the future of the American meal—by shopping at farmers’ markets, for example. The first sections of the book showed that idealized meals are intimately bound up with social class, while derided eating habits are often those associated with minorities and lower social classes. Readers familiar with other scholarship on American dietary beliefs, such as the work of Charlotte Biltkoff and Julie Guthman, will likely note that Carroll’s own portrait of the ideal meal is highly raced and classed. While she may suggest a nutritionally and socially sound way to eat, it cannot be separated from contemporary class projects—just as Three Squares shows us that historical changes in American eating habits cannot be separated from the class projects and distinct ideologies of their respective eras.

In all, Three Squares offers an enjoyable history of American meals. It is a worthwhile read for food scholars and
nonacademics alike, and will provide excellent fodder for conversations around the dinner table.

—Lauren Renée Moore, University of Kentucky

Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America’s Whiskey
Reid Mitenbuler
New York: Viking, 2015
310 pp. $27.95 (hardback)

Americans have long seen spirits—especially bourbon—as distillations of values as much as of corn and wheat. Colonial-era drinkers hailed corn whiskey as a symbol of self-reliance, a homegrown alternative to rum made with imported ingredients. Modern-day craft distillers use imagery from early American history and the Prohibition years to market bourbon as a rebellious, individualistic frontier drink. In his book Bourbon Empire: The Past and Future of America’s Whiskey, spirits writer Reid Mitenbuler peels back whiskey labels to explore the true origins of a drink that has defined American distilling.

Behind the hoary depictions of moonshiners and outlaws, Mitenbuler finds a thoroughly modern industry that is largely controlled by multinational spirits conglomerates. Many popular “craft” bourbons—such as Diageo’s Bulleit Frontier Whiskey and Beam Suntory’s Knob Creek—are produced by vast companies with production facilities around the world. But even independently owned bottlers may not be what they seem. Mitenbuler reels through a list of brands that line top shelves in bars across America: there is Templeton Rye, a twenty-first-century bottling company that buys its whiskey from the bulk distiller MGPI, and resells it as “the same whiskey that Al Capone drank” (p.203); and Michter’s, a brand that launched in the 1990s with labels that read “1753,” and the suggestion that the company supplied George Washington with whiskey during the American Revolution.

It is a situation that gives rise to colorful juxtapositions, as Mitenbuler notes while sampling “moonshine” with white-coated scientists in a sparkling laboratory. But he is too nuanced an author to spend much energy catching out fabrications, and has a narrative-oriented perspective captured by the proverb that opens the book: “What’s truer than truth? The story” (p.ix). Mitenbuler’s aim is to understand why drinkers and distillers tell the stories they do, and explore the reasons why fictional “authenticity” sells more booze than the industrial reality.

To do so, he traces bourbon’s origins back to early European settlers, who swapped native corn into the whiskey recipes they had brought from home. The spirits’ fortunes rose and fell repeatedly, as American values and drinking habits changed, ice became commercially available, consumer protection laws were written, and a nationwide ban on alcohol was passed and repealed. It is a tangled web of stories that is often entertaining, but sometimes unfocused. This may be due, in part, to the contrast between the true history of bourbon and the picturesque version used for marketing purposes; bourbon’s early evolution was poorly documented, and much of its post-Prohibition history is a corporate tale of mergers and industry. Some readers may find themselves in sympathy with those distillers that learned about bourbon’s origin stories, and decided to write new ones.

Mitenbuler’s most engaging ideas touch on bourbon’s recent resurgence; the author explains current controversies about “craft spirits” as friction between ideas that he traces to Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. He believes that Hamilton would smile on the modern, large-scale whiskey industry, whose efficiency-driven production has made consistent, good-quality whiskey available at a low price. But the folk appeal of craft spirits, he suggests, are a resurgence of Jefferson’s romantic ideals. The men that appear on bourbon bottles—and they are almost always men—are icons of the artisans, farmers, and frontiersmen that Jefferson saw as the future of the American economy, and a source of moral strength for the country. In an era of pervasive industrialization and technological change, that Jeffersonian cast of characters has nostalgic power. Today, smallness conveys status and quality, which puts large distillers on the defensive. At times Mitenbuler steps in to support the giants, reminding drinkers that early bourbon was harsh and often adulterated, and that industry brought quality and consistency to the drink. We might enjoy the tintype images of nineteenth-century distillers, he argues, but we would probably steer clear of the booze they made.

He praises the value offered by industrial spirits, and reminds readers of the advantages of scale. But it is telling that he ends his book with a visit to Coppersea distillery in upstate New York, which produces spirits in tiny batches from grain they grow themselves in nearby fields. Within Mitenbuler’s conclusion is a nuanced pivot: despite the advantages of well-rounded spirits from large manufacturers, he believes that decades of homogenization have gone too far, and there is real value in a return to small-scale alcohol production. He cautions readers to drink thoughtfully and ask questions, but also, maybe, to relax and enjoy the whiskey. Bourbon’s history, he muses, remains a “curious pastiche of charming truths and strange little lies. In the end, it might not matter which are which” (p.288).

—Jen Rose Smith, Writer, Vermont