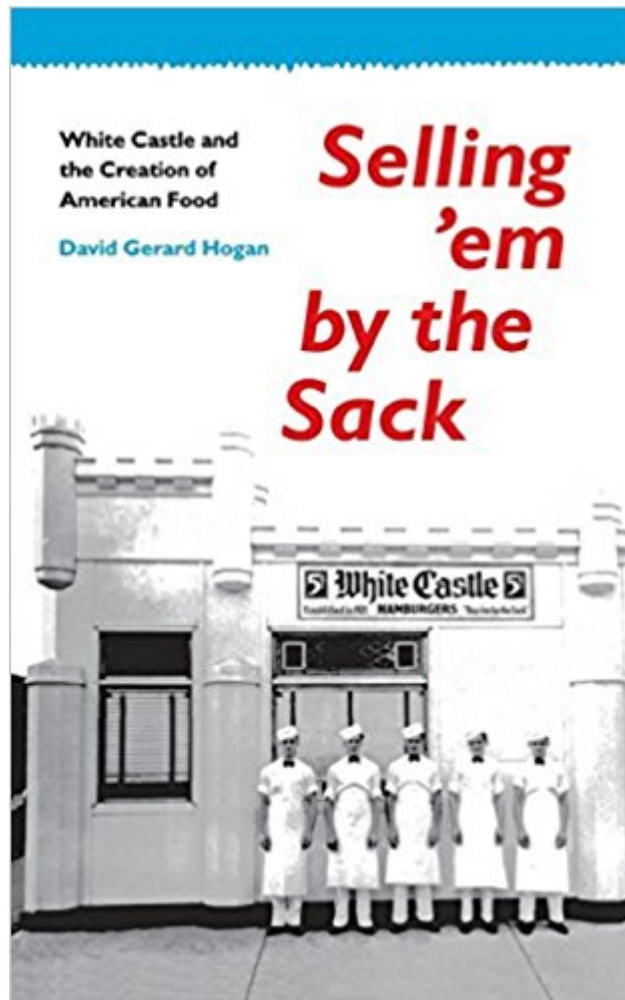




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Selling 'em By The Sack: White Castle And The Creation Of American Food



Synopsis

In the wake of World War I, the hamburger was still considered a disreputable and undesirable food. Yet by 1930 Americans in every corner of the country accepted the hamburger as a mainstream meal and eventually made it a staple of their diet. The quintessential "American" food, hamburgers have by now spread to almost every country and culture in the world. But how did this fast food icon come to occupy so quickly such a singular role in American mass culture? In *Selling the Sack*, David Gerard Hogan traces the history of the hamburger's rise as a distinctive American culinary and ethnic symbol through the prism of one of its earliest promoters. The first to market both the hamburger and the "to go" carry-out style to American consumers, White Castle quickly established itself as a cornerstone of the fast food industry. Its founder, Billy Ingram, shrewdly marketed his hamburgers in large quantities at five cents a piece, telling his customers to "Buy'em by the Sack." The years following World War II saw the rise of great franchised chains such as McDonald's, which challenged and ultimately overshadowed the company that Billy Ingram founded. Yet White Castle stands as a charismatic pioneer in one of America's most formidable industries, a company that drastically changed American eating patterns, and hence, American life. It could be argued that what Henry Ford did for the car and transportation, Billy Ingram did for the hamburger and eating.

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Customer Reviews

A scholar's lively account of how White Castle, now a largely overlooked but still profitable also-ran

in the domestic restaurant trade, made the once-scorned hamburger a US institution and launched the fast-food industry. Drawing on a variety of sources, historian Hogan (Heidelberg Coll.) first reviews the ethnic and regional character of America's food preferences prior to the 1920s. He goes on to document the accomplishments of the two men who founded White Castle late in 1921 in Wichita, Kans.: Walt Anderson, inventor of the hamburger, and Billy Ingram, whose marketing genius helped make Anderson's creation a staple of American diets. On the strength of standardization, quality control, a commitment to cleanliness, and conservative financial practices, they soon had a lucrative national network of faux-citadel outlets vending tiny ground-meat patties served with an abundance of pungent onions on diminutive buns for a nickel apiece; enjoining customers to "buy 'em by the sack," the partners also pioneered the take-out business. Although it survived the Great Depression in fine style, White Castle was hard hit by WW II's home-front price controls, shortages, and restrictions. Having staggered through the 1940s, however, the company retained its fanatically loyal clientele in the cities while formidable new rivals (Big Boy, Gino's, Hardee's, Howard Johnson, McDonald's, et al.) preempted fast-growing suburban markets. Although no longer a leader in the field of franchising giants it helped create, White Tower occupies a rewarding niche that, thanks to effective management practices, promises to provide worthwhile returns for years to come. Informed and engaging perspectives on an often ignored aspect of cultural and commercial Americana. The 20 illustrations include contemporary photos of White Castle outlets and the company's early advertisements. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A fascinating story . . . Hogan tells a truly American success story; luck and hard work behind one man to create an industry so pervasive that today it's an integral part of American pop culture."-Publishers Weekly

"A scholar's lively account of how White Castle, now a largely overlooked but still profitable also-ran in the domestic restaurant trade, made the once-scorned hamburger a U.S. institution and launched the fast-food industry. . . . Informed and engaging perspectives on an often ignored aspect of cultural and commercial Americana."-Kirkus Reviews

"David Hogan's love of fast food goes back at least twenty years: I remember talking to him while he gulped down a McDonald's before the start of class. Few historians I know would be able to translate their penchant for fast food into a wonderful case study of the first chain to sell huge numbers of hamburgers-to-go. Selling 'em by the Sack, which traces the fortunes and failures of White Castle from the 1920s to the 1990s, deftly blends biography, social history, and corporate history. In doing so, Hogan gives us a fascinating glimpse into American popular culture." -Andrew

Achenbaum, Professor of History, University of Michigan "Hogan makes a convincing case for White Castle's influence." -Jonathan Yardley, Washington Post "Full of fascinating details, not only for devotees of the ubiquitous 'slider,' but also for pop-culturists interested in American fast food and how it all got started." -Minneapolis Star Tribune

Still reading this book but so far is very good.

This book is very well researched, informative, and an interesting read. I loved reading how White Castle evolved over the years. A lot of hard work went into this book and it's well worth your time. Read it, and hopefully there will be a White Castle nearby for when you start craving a sackful. UPDATED: 9/23/2007 David, As I'm sure you keep up with your reviews on , just wanted to say that I had some Whitecastles when I was in St Louis this summer, and I thought of your book and when you were doing the research on it. Just wanted to say that I still miss History class, good times! I ate 4 Whitecastles at the restaurant and enjoyed every one of them. VonHartenfeld

Okay, so here's my bias: I grew up eating White Castle Hamburgers, and have been deprived of them ever since I moved out west. So this book was truly the next best thing to eating 'em! Now having said that, this book is nevertheless a fun and informative read; and a pop culture history that will bring a smile to your face. The writing is at times a tad clunky, and the later chapters not as detailed as one would like. The premise of the book--that American culture was shaped in part by the White Castle Hamburger--gets a bit lost. But the premise itself is strong enough to make the overall work a winner. Strongly recommended to burger lovers everywhere!

"White Castle" is something special in a category that is nothing special: the (take-out) "fast food" of the United States. Special in a number of senses: it's the oldest in the branded hamburger trade, it was, until a few decades ago, much more urban than most of the chains (which were part and parcel of suburbanism, though they soon enough re-invaded urban America and contributed to poor nutrition & obesity there), and it was an odd inversion of the usual American notion that "size matters": the hamburgers were small, maybe half the size of the nearest competitors. Older potheads probably remember unintentional contests in how many could be eaten at 3 in the morning. Those who smoked in the American South likely remember the chain under a break-off label, "Krystal". This book is an excellent contribution to American folk culture and business culture. It's short, 179 pages not counting the copious notes, and it's a good introduction to branded

fast-fooding, that is to say, non-lunch-counter, non-peddler-peddling-nameless frankfurters etc. The author covers the sociological bases for the rise of exvasive chow-wagon entrepreneurship in such places as Coney Island, the origins and development of the "White Castle" business, and the company's odd survival against such megabrands such as MacDonalds. It's remarkable how many elements of American culture the author ties into something that, seemingly, really wouldn't matter to anyone other than those who worked there, along with hordes of dope-smokers.

SELLING `EM BY THE SACK can be perceived and read for any one or more of several reasons. As an informal textbook on business management, or maybe marketing. As a social commentary on the rise of fast food, or possibly what defines America to the rest of the world. Or, as just a history of the hamburger from a culinary standpoint. The author, David Hogan, effectively makes the case that White Castle and its founders, Billy Ingram and Walt Anderson (especially the former), were the originators of the fast food "carryout" concept, and that they established the humble hamburger as the distinctive ethnic cuisine of the USA. The evolutionary history of White Castle from the early part of the 20th century to the present is described, from its founding in Wichita in 1921, through the Depression and two wars (W.W.II and Korea), to the era of the big chains (like McDonald's and Burger King), which, miraculously, have not brought about its demise. Along the way, Billy Ingram and his successors have successfully coped with an endless series of challenges, the first of which was to make the hamburger perceived as a sanitary and healthy food at all. Then came standardization of the product, national expansion, gaining credibility with and acceptance from the middle class, coping with war rationing, the hiring of women, surviving the rise of the superchains, adapting to suburbanization of the cities, defending against rising urban crime, facing increasing government regulations, and answering the health-conscious critics' attacks on the fast food lifestyle. Today, White Castle survives as a barely medium-sized chain in the north-central and northeast regions of the United States. It has kept alive the guiding principles of its founders, has acquired a fanatical following, and remains profitable at a time when even larger chains, like Burger Chef and White Tower, have since disappeared from the American landscape. SELLING `EM BY THE SACK is not a "thriller", offers no high drama, is written with no humor whatsoever, and is actually a little dry. Had it been about a brand of toothpaste or bread, I wouldn't have bothered. But, it's about hamburgers. (Oddly enough, cheeseburgers are never mentioned in any context.) So, I read it, was entertained, and learned a lot. I've never eaten a White Castle. Where I live, in Southern California, the brand is represented only by its frozen burgers that one can buy in the supermarkets. I've seen them in packages of a dozen. They seem ridiculously small when compared with

McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Jack-In-the-Box, Carl's, or In-`n'-Out. I think I'll buy a "sack".

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