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Review: From Saloons to Steak Houses: A History of Tampa

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Andrew T. Huse. *From Saloons to Steak Houses: A History of Tampa*. University Press of Florida, 2020. xi, 321 pp.

In the preface of *From Saloons to Steak Houses: A History of Tampa*, librarian Andrew T. Huse notes that the majority of studies and narratives of Tampa concentrate on the major forces that shaped its landscape, culture, and future: the cigar industry and its labor force, which consisted mostly of skilled Cuban immigrants. Scholars have traditionally paid less attention to places of public consumption—places of recreation and leisure, and often of conflict, where social and political processes played out in the everyday activities of Tampa’s foreign-born and US-born population—and it is these places, which act as “sensitive barometers of culture, commerce, and demographics” (ix), that help us map the political and social discourses of Tampa’s history.

The saloons and speakeasies of Ybor City and Tampa make these discourses and cultural currents visible on the Tampa Bay landscape. So too do the gambling halls, lunch counters, and jook joints, working class bars operated and frequented primarily by African Americans in the US South during the early twentieth century. Each chapter of the book addresses these specific sites and the ways in which they demonstrate the cultural formation, as well as “shifting values and social contours” (x) of Tampa in a sweeping timeline from roughly the 1890s to the 1970s. At times, this temporal swath reads as almost too broad and may leave scholars wanting for more context; such scholars would find Gary Mormino’s work, especially *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*[\[1\]](#) and *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985*,[\[2\]](#) particularly useful.

Ethnopolitical tensions and racial conflicts boiled over in saloons and social clubs, particularly as Florida became a middle ground between Cuba, the United States, and Spain during the Spanish-American War in 1898. Spanish agents poisoned Cuban revolutionary José Martí’s wine, for example, in an attempted assassination during his visit to Ybor City in 1892. Further, the rise and fall of soup kitchens and cooperative stores chart the ebbs and flows of labor disputes, strikes, and other collective actions as factory workers resisted the mandates of a corporatizing cigar industry. Bakeries

make evident wartime hysteria and xenophobia; as World War I raged in Europe, bakers grappled with flour shortages, labor scarcity, unfounded rumors of food sabotage by German spies, and consumer outrage over climbing prices. One such baker was enmeshed in scandal when Tampanians complained of finding ground glass in their bread. Lunch counters, like the one at the Woolworth's and W.T. Grant's in Tampa, were sites of protest as Black high school students, taking cues from college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged three days of sit-ins beginning on February 29, 1960, as they advocated for desegregation. Lunch counters would not integrate in Tampa until September 14. Daytona Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, Miami, Orlando, Sarasota, St. Petersburg, and Pompano Beach would all follow suit by February 1961.

Many, if not most, of the sites documented in the text no longer exist, which makes *From Saloons to Steak Houses* a vital contribution not just to the study of Tampa's history, but also to the study of Florida's historic foodways more broadly. Huse relies on a wealth of archival sources to reconstruct Tampa's past, including articles from local newspapers like the *Tampa Tribune*. He notes the challenges of relying on such sources: biases of newspapers and a lack of records kept by business owners—especially when those businesses, like speakeasies, were illegal—necessitates additional research. Thus, Huse also drew on government records like meeting minutes and police reports, organizational records, and transcripts from oral history interviews, some of which were archival (from the US Work Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project, for example) and others he conducted himself. Still, such sourcing makes apparent the silences that exist in the archive, evident by the fewer accounts of women and African Americans in the text. Among this trove of information, a narrative emerges of Tampa's history that complicates traditional perspectives, which focus largely on Tampa as a town dominated first by the cigar industry, then by “nude dancing and attorneys” (279) and images of pirates and gangsters. Huse therein constructs an easily readable and largely accessible history that, while sometimes seedy and other times inspiring, portrays Tampa largely as a site of resistance by its working class population: resistance to dry laws in the boom of illicit alcohol sales at unlicensed bars; resistance to corporate control of the cigar factories in the form of labor strikes, which were fed by soup kitchens and cantinas; resistance to restrictions on sexual expression, harsh labor conditions, and the brutality of Jim Crow in the revelry found at jook joints; resistance to racial segregation at lunch counter sit-ins.

In studying foodways of the US South, lunch counters and the sit-ins that occurred there across the region in the early 1960s are often the primary example of sites of

social conflict and resistance to injustice. By centering places of public consumption more broadly, Huse's approach to the history of Tampa demonstrates the ways in which resistance played out in numerous other public places of consumption: restaurants, saloons, jook joints, soup kitchens, and speakeasies, as well as lunch counters. Therefore, scholars should take note of this useful intervention and Huse's call to study sites of recreation and leisure. In this way, *From Saloons to Steak Houses* provides ripe ground for future conversations about, and study of, the intersections of race, class, food, and place within Tampa, within Florida, and within the US South more broadly.

Biography

Carlynn Crosby, a Florida native, is a writer and scholar of Florida foodways. She is a recent graduate of the University of Mississippi, where she earned her MA in southern studies. She is the current conference coordinator for the Graduate Association for Food Studies.

Citations

1. Gary R. Mormino, *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008). [↵](#)
2. Gary R. Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987). [↵](#)