So, Shaw, if you were going to die tomorrow morning, what would you want for dinner tonight?’

Friends who are alternatively amused and appalled by my obsession with eating well have asked that question and I’ve never known how to answer. But some people do. They’re on death row, and, according to long-standing tradition on death rows almost everywhere, they can ask for virtually anything they want for dinner on the night before their execution – and, within reason, they’re likely to get it.

Morbid though it might seem, people are so interested in convicts’ last meals that, until last month, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice listed its inmates’ requests on its website – every item requested for every final dinner since Texas resumed capital punishment in 1982.

When the department redesigned its website in mid-December, officials decided to delete the last-meal listings.

“We had some complaints from people who thought it was in poor taste,” says Michelle Lyons, a department spokesman. “Of course, new people are complaining that the last meals are missing from our site.”

But why had the state listed the final meals for so long? I always thought it was because Texas was proud of its record of being, by far, the nation’s leading official killer, having executed 314 people since 1982. But Lyons said the last-meal information was listed solely because “that was the No 1 inquiry from the public” about death row inmates.

Other states report similar curiosity about inmates’ final meals, and at least two – California and Arizona – continue to list those requests on their websites.

Before it was discontinued, the Texas list of last meals provided fascinating if macabre reading. Brian Price, who prepared 220 final meals in the Huntsville, Texas, prison kitchen while an inmate himself before he was paroled last year, has written a book featuring recipes for some of those last bites before oblivion. Meals to Die For, scheduled for publication next month, will have 42 recipes, including those with jarring names such as “post-mortem potato soup”, “uh-oh I’m dead meat loaf” and “rice rigor mortis”.

The 504-page book will contain Price’s personal recollections of the execution day for each of the 220 killers whose last meals he cooked, as well as his accounts of the cases that led to 42 of the executions.

Although I often buy cookbooks for my wife, I don’t expect Meals to Die For to be on my shopping list; Lucy’s taste runs more to salmon with red wine mushroom sauce than to Price’s “last-wish fish with time’s-up tartar sauce.”

Not that fish was a death row favourite. What was? I guessed steak as the top choice. I was wrong. It’s French fries. Of the 314 inmates, 111 asked for fries. (Apparently, one’s
last meal is not an occasion to worry about government studies that say fries are one of the most unhealthful foods on the planet.)

Hamburgers were the second-most-popular food, with 85 requests. Price’s cookbook calls the inmates’ favourite final meal “chopping block cheeseburger and firing squad French fries”. (I guess killers in Texas aren’t completely different from the rest of us; according to two-thirds of the respondents in a nation-wide poll by Food & Wine magazine last year, a burger and fries is seen as the “quintessential American food”.)

Glossary:
capital punishment n. the legally authorized killing of someone as punishment for a crime. death row n. a prison block or section for those sentenced to death.
Read the article ‘The Chopping Block Burger’ and answer the following questions.

Questions:
Refer to the lead paragraph.
1. Account for (give a reason) for the apostrophe after inmates in ‘Death row inmates’ final meal …’ (1)

Refer to paragraph 1.
2. Rewrite the first sentence, “So, Shaw … dinner tonight” in reported speech. Start your sentence: Shaw was asked … (3)

Refer to paragraph 2.
3. Provide a synonym for ‘appalled’. (1)

4. Explain the expression ‘they’re on death row’. (2)

5. Name the part of speech for ‘long-standing’. (1)

Refer to paragraph 3.
6. Why, do you think, are people so interested in the last meals of convicts? (2)

7. ‘… since Texas resumed capital punishment …’ Explain what the word ‘resumed’ indicates about Texan punishment of criminals. (2)

Refer to paragraph 6.
8. The impression of Texas conveyed at the beginning of this paragraph is
   A. bloodthirsty and vengeful
   B. efficient and organised
   C. law-abiding and disciplined
   D. friendly and supportive
   Select one and write down the letter of your choice. (1)

Refer to paragraph 8.
9. Is the following statement true or false?
   The word ‘macabre’ means ‘horrible’ or ‘gruesome’. (1)

Refer to paragraph 9.
10. How appropriate is the title of the book, Meals to Die For, in your opinion? Do you find it amusing or objectionable? Supply a reason for your answer. (2)

Refer to paragraph 8 and 10.
11. In these paragraphs the author mentions a number of dishes. Use your imagination to re-name any ONE of the following along similar lines:
   A. Shepherd’s Pie
   B. Spaghetti Bolognaise
   C. Meat balls