



## PART 3

# From the Chow Hall to “Home Cooking” in Prison

“The minute you walk through that area, it smelled like something was rotten and dying.”

— formerly incarcerated person

The first two installments of *Eating Behind Bars* focused on the quality of the food itself. This section begins by examining the bleak physical environments and fraught dynamics in which prison meals take place, and why those environments matter.

People have been eating together throughout history. Ancient archaeological sites show evidence of this in the arrangement of the hearth, food-related tools and equipment, and even preserved fragments of food. Quite simply, sharing a meal is part of being human. In prisons that house hundreds if not thousands of people, official mealtime is inherently a collective affair, except of course for people confined to their cell. But the typical prison chow hall bears little resemblance to a shared meal in the free world.



↑ Men eat in a dining hall at Lakeview Shock Correctional Facility in upstate New York in 2013

Source: Getty Images

**“You have guns and guards on you at all times. You don’t know if it’s even safe. Your enemy can be sitting right next to you.”**

— Marcus, incarcerated 22 years

**85%**

of survey respondents stated that the place where they ate most meals was not welcoming or social

### Eating en masse: the chow hall

Marcus described the chow hall in the West Coast prison where he was incarcerated as a “very scary” and “nerve-wracking” environment. “You have guns and guards on you at all times. You don’t know if it’s even safe. Your enemy can be sitting right next to you.” As his recollections suggest, incarcerated people have to navigate complex social norms defined by the residents—eyes cast down on your own tray unless engaging a friend, and not sharing food with someone of a different race, for example—and by the official rules.

Such a crowded, stressful environment combined with unpalatable food creates conditions in which tensions run high and fights can break out with little or no warning. Corrections officials told us that in an effort to keep the peace and protect especially vulnerable residents from “grooming” or outright intimidation by residents with more power, some prisons prohibit talking during mealtime or the sharing of food with anyone, even if it will otherwise go to waste—rules that might be enforced inconsistently, depending on who’s on duty in the dining hall that meal.



**Fight-or-flight states not only inhibit digestion, but also increase the likelihood of misinterpreting social cues as hostility, which heightens security risks for both staff and incarcerated people.**

During our investigation, we learned that personal spices or sauces that people might use to enhance the bland food or cover up an unpleasant taste are often banned from dining halls for the same reason. That someone’s hot sauce, and the envy or resentment it might spark in others, could cause a fight or be used as a weapon says a lot about the environment in the typical prison chow hall.

The people we surveyed and interviewed who have endured thousands of mealtimes in prison almost uniformly described the chow hall as drab and bleak, lacking in natural light, loud, and often uncomfortably hot or cold. As Marcus said, “It’s a box. Everything is metal. It’s cold.” While these qualities describe prison in general, they seem to feel especially harsh when coupled with food, which people look to for comfort. The worn-out trays and dull plastic sporks used in the name of security add to the degradation.

Science is beginning to reveal the deeper effects of such obviously unpleasant environments and how they can exacerbate a negative relationship with food. The quality of light, for example, affects how the body processes food. While natural daylight supports metabolic health, lack of exposure to natural light, as well as exposure to artificial light in the evening, appears to impact blood glucose levels and insulin sensitivity, therefore increasing the risk of obesity and diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have also documented a correlation between ambient noise, what people choose to eat, and how much they enjoy a meal: In louder environments, people tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables and derive less pleasure from a meal.<sup>2</sup> Other research shows that noisy environments often signal danger, particularly to those with histories of trauma and victimization. When such environments are combined with other perceived threats (such as armed guards or past experiences of violence in that location), this can prompt people to enter a fight-or-flight mode without realizing it.<sup>3</sup> Fight-or-flight states not only inhibit digestion, but also increase the likelihood of misinterpreting social cues as hostility, which heightens security risks for both staff and incarcerated people.



## LETTING THE LIGHT IN



### EATING ENVIRONMENT



#### ↑ Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility

Source: Lawrence Anderson

Photography, Inc. and HMC Architects



Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility is a county facility operated by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department. We include Las Colinas here because it was the only example we encountered of a facility with an eating environment that aims to mirror life on the outside.

The chow hall at Cedar Creek Corrections Center in Littlerock, Washington, has a wall of windows that fill the space with natural light. There is also an adjacent outdoor eating area accessible to all residents and staff, weather permitting, and those tables are reportedly packed in the summer as people enjoy the fresh air.

The dining hall at Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility in Santee, California, is similarly light-filled. In 2014 a local architecture firm had a vision for transforming what was a particularly unpleasant area in this facility into a warm and inviting place for women to gather and eat. Today, sunlight beams through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, enhancing the light greens and soft earth tones of the new space. Regular chairs and tables have replaced the conventional bolted-down metal tables and stools, giving the room the air of a museum cafeteria. While movement through the meal line is still regimented, rules have changed to allow conversation and the sharing of food between women seated at the same table. Staff and residents report feeling more relaxed and less stressed during meals, leading to a positive shift in atmosphere throughout the facility.

The unpleasant and sometimes threatening atmosphere of the chow hall is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Chow halls and their rules are designed with assumptions of misconduct and uncivil behavior in mind. Sociologists have found that such expectations actually can become determinants of behavior for incarcerated individuals.<sup>4</sup> If incarcerated people are treated as though they can't handle eating in a less-regimented environment, they are more likely to meet that expectation. Conversely, loosening unnecessary restrictions and making the dining area feel more welcoming, like better eating environments outside prison, can actually enhance safety, while creating a more satisfying eating experience (see “Letting the light in,” above).

Some of the worst chow halls are flat-out unsanitary. Our surveys and interviews reveal accounts of visible mold on walls, swarms of insects buzzing overhead, and odors of “something rotten and dying.” In one case, people ate for years in a space that was eventually shut down because of exposure to toxic mold and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), both of which can cause a host of serious health issues.<sup>5</sup>

Eating in prison is typically a regimented, impersonal, and rushed affair. “It always felt like feeding us was more like a duty,” explains Natalia, who served time on the East Coast. “They don’t care if people are really nourished. That affects you mentally.” While incarcerated people are supposed to have 15-20 minutes to eat a meal, they can spend much of that time waiting in line until it’s their turn to receive a tray. Scarfing down food, especially in a state of anxiety or fear, obviously hinders digestion. So do breakfast calls in the middle of the night, unnaturally early dinner times, and reported lapses between meals of more than 14 hours during the weekend when there are fewer staff.<sup>6</sup>

Formerly incarcerated people also describe the shame of eating in front of staff who look at them in disgust; tension with staff keeps some people from going to the chow hall at all.

Formerly incarcerated people also describe the shame of eating in front of staff who look at them in disgust; tension with staff keeps some people from going to the chow hall at all. A parent we surveyed wrote that his incarcerated son skips dinner to avoid “an aggressively antagonistic” staff member, and is perpetually hungry and losing weight as a result.

We also heard multiple accounts of officers teasing or taunting incarcerated people with food. Alicia, who spent 15 years inside, told us that corrections staff would frequently hold office parties with pizza or cake, and that “more often than not, they would intentionally trash the leftover food so it wouldn’t be edible [for us].” A corrections officer in another state confirmed that this is not an unusual occurrence: “There’s some staff that can be vindictive and eat pizza or lunch right in front of inmates. There’s definitely a difference between what we bring to work and what they’re being fed. They see when we have our potlucks.”

“Being served inedible food in a chow hall full of insects, being told you have five minutes to eat it with your sweat dripping into the food ... That was truly horrific.”

—Rosa, incarcerated for 33 years

Not all prisons have central chow halls. As noted above, in some facilities people eat in the communal dayroom of their housing unit—a smaller space where the faces are mainly familiar, but not free of tension and not necessarily pleasant. Despite the name, there may be little or no natural light. As for people confined to their cells—either temporarily as punishment or over the long term in special housing units—their eating experience is demeaning in a different way. Trays are often delivered through a slot in the cell door, and meals are eaten sitting right next to the odors and germs of the toilet. And of course, they have no choice of dining companion, regardless of whether they are housed individually or live with a cellmate.

Whether in dining halls, dayrooms, or cells, 85% percent of the released people we surveyed indicated that the environment where they ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in prison was neither “welcoming” nor “social”—things we expect in the places where we eat food. As Rosa summed up, “Being served inedible food in a chow hall full of insects, being told you have five minutes to eat it with your sweat dripping into the food because it’s not air-conditioned, not being allowed to talk or trade for something that somebody else doesn’t want ... That was truly horrific.”

### Staff dining: not much better

The people who staff prisons obviously go home at the end of their shift and have access to a much wider range of food in their lives compared with incarcerated people. But at work they’re often not eating well either. Rules, routines, and geography can get in the way of healthy eating habits. Some facilities don’t allow staff to bring their own food past the security checkpoint, making that food less accessible during the short breaks in their shift. And in rural areas where the prison is miles from the nearest grocery store or restaurant, going out for food in the middle of a shift is impossible. As a result, many prison employees are reliant on the staff dining hall, where they might be served the same unappealing, unhealthy food as the

## Staff dining in U.S. prisons

Most states provide the same meals to staff as incarcerated people.

Same menu as incarcerated people\*

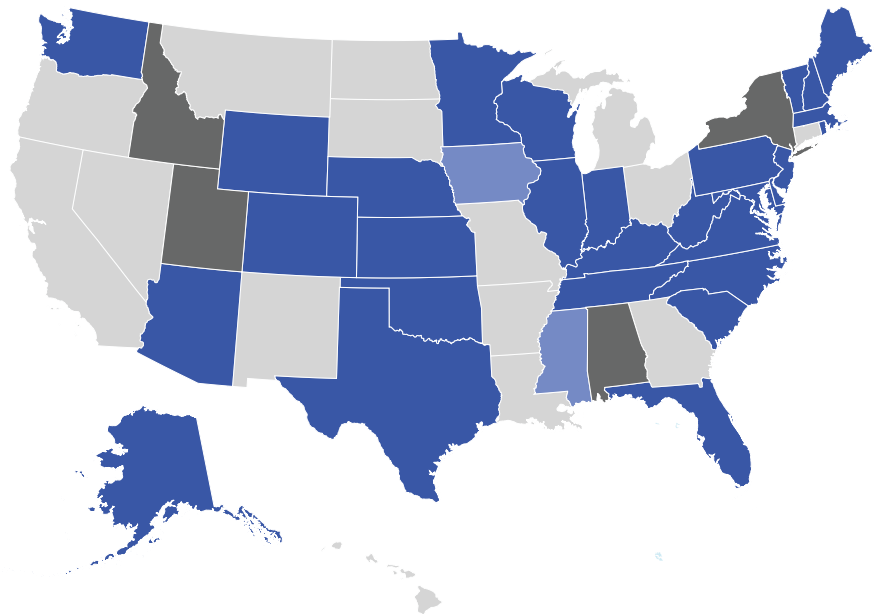
Staff meal provided, different menu

No staff meal provided

No data available

\* While the primary meal is the same as what is served to incarcerated people, staff in Washington, Illinois, and Tennessee also have access to a healthy alternative (i.e., salad bar or grilled chicken).

Source: Impact Justice (2020).



residents, or fare that’s not much better. One corrections officer described “constant weight gain” as part of the job.

The corrections staff we spoke with also described a significant decline in food quality over the course of their careers, and some of them no longer feel comfortable or safe eating the food cooked on site. One corrections officer told us that the food in her facility used to be good, explaining, “It was fresh, and the cooks cared about what they put out.” Since a statewide shift to centralized food production, however, she no longer eats the meals provided, explaining, “Once or twice I tried, but I couldn’t eat it. ... It’s poor quality.” People told us they depend heavily on snacks from vending machines to get them through the day. Beyond the food itself, eating on the inside is a hurried, uncomfortable experience, staff report. People said they don’t have time to sit down to a meal and eat at a natural pace. One former officer who worked in a Southern facility said that she frequently skipped breakfast or lunch entirely because of the heavy workload on a shift. We learned of one facility lacking a designated lunch break for officers, who instead must carry a lunch bag with them all day and grab bites when they can.





↑ While many people can't afford to eat from commissary, and the options are mostly unhealthy, some of our interviewees described positive and meaningful memories associated with cooking and eating with friends

### 'Home cooking' in prison

The counterpart to the generally tasteless (or worse) big batch food prepared in prison kitchens are meals that incarcerated people make for themselves and others with supplies purchased at the facility commissary, known in some prisons as the canteen. A typical commissary sells common snack foods (e.g., candy bars, honey buns, cookies, chips), non-perishable condiments (e.g., soy sauce and hot sauce), and some more substantial packaged foods (e.g., macaroni and cheese, pouches of tuna, tortillas, the ever-popular ramen noodle soups), as well as basic toiletries, over-the-counter medications, extra clothing, and postage stamps. While a commissary might stock a few different varieties of especially popular items, in general brands and options are extremely limited. We didn't encounter any facilities that offer fresh produce or other perishables like eggs and milk in their commissary.



## Commissary Prices

This graphic shows how many hours someone incarcerated in the labeled state would need to work in order to afford the purchase listed.



### Hawaii

**\$0.75** = **3 hrs**  
3 oz package of chicken ramen of work

*If someone worked minimum wage outside of prison, they could buy close to 100 ramen packs with three hours of work.*



### Minnesota

**\$7.92** = **8 hrs**  
8 oz Folgers instant coffee of work

*Based on the average pay in the state.*



### Pennsylvania

**\$2.49** = **13 hrs**  
10 oz salted mixed nuts of work

*For incarcerated people who at the low end get paid \$0.19 per hour.*

Typically once a week, although in some prisons less often, people with money in their accounts have the opportunity to purchase a limited dollar amount of food and other items, either by filling out a commissary form and waiting for delivery or visiting the commissary window. Many facilities also permit family members and friends to send packages to incarcerated people through approved vendors whose catalogues feature items similar to what the commissary stocks.

With what people can afford to buy at the commissary, and by creatively using plastic garbage bags as mixing bowls, ID cards as knives, an immersion heater in a bucket of water, and other improvised devices, incarcerated people partake in culinary rituals that echo those on the outside: cobbling together daily comfort foods, preparing holiday fare, and laboring over special desserts for birthdays and other celebrations. Many formerly incarcerated people we surveyed and interviewed recalled these “home-cooked” meals as some of the only positive moments during their time in prison.

The sharing of food—taking in something that literally becomes a part of us—can be a deeply symbolic act that affirms our common humanity. And through food, we can communicate without speaking: “I’m sorry,” “Feel better,” “I love you.” Aaron remembered making a big spread of nachos with tortilla chips and processed cheese to eat while watching the Super Bowl inside prison. Rosa, a trans woman, recalled the time she and some friends started purchasing ramen soups, chips, and other items weeks in advance of Christmas to make a huge “pocket,” a mash-up of savory snacks blended together in a trash bag. She still feels the pride of being able to share that pocket with almost 80 men, many of whom couldn’t afford to purchase items from the commissary.

Commissary items are not cheap. In some prisons, prices are inflated compared to identical products in grocery stores. But even if the price is the same, a \$0.40 package of ramen is expensive for someone earning \$0.10 an hour at a prison job.

## Sample commissary list

This is one page of 14 from the Kansas Correctional Industries Commissary Menu

Source: Kansas Department of Corrections. (2019) *Kansas Correctional Industries Commissary Menu*. Topeka, KS: Kansas Department of Corrections.

KANSAS CORRECTIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMISSARY MENU											
TOPEKA CORRECTIONAL FACILITY COMBINED MENU											
G=GEN. POPULATION, A=ADMIN. SEG. D=DISC. SEG											
R=GEN. RESTRICTION, Z=LEVEL "0"											
CANTEN PRICE DOES NOT INCLUDE SALES TAX @9.15%											
ITEM	GROCERIES	SUGAR	SALT	K/H	SIZE	PRICE	"G"	"A"	"D"	"R"	"Z"
MEATS - SEAFOOD											
6586	BACK COUNTRY BEEF STEW				11.25 OZ	\$2.19	G	A			
6614	COMAL SHREDDED CHICKEN w/ GREEN SAUCE				8 OZ	\$3.95	G	A			
6618	BACK COUNTRY BEEF BURGER				4 OZ	\$3.30	G	A			
6623	PANCHO'S CANTINA SHREDDED BEEF			H	7 OZ	\$3.84	G	A			
6630	RIP N READY MEATBALLS IN TOMATO SAUCE				10 OZ	\$4.00	G	A			
6637	BACK COUNTRY TACO FILLING				11.25 OZ	\$2.60	G	A			
6639	SIAM CHINESE PORK SAUSAGE				4.5 OZ	\$2.50	G	A			
6645	HORMEL SPAM CLASSIC SINGLE				3 OZ	\$1.84	G	A			
6655	BACK COUNTRY PREMIUM CHICKEN WHITE MEAT IN A POUCH				4.5 OZ	\$2.30	G	A			
6686	LEGENDARY MEAT SNACKS HOT BEEF SUMMER SAUSAGE				5 OZ	\$1.74	G	A			
6693	LEGENDARY MEAT SNACKS BEEF SALAMI				5 OZ	\$1.66	G	A			
6697	BACK COUNTRY PEPPERONI PRE SLICED				3.5 OZ	\$1.86	G	A			
6715	O'BRIEN'S HOT SHOTS MEAT SNACKS				1.125 OZ	\$0.60	G	A			
6830	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE LIGHT TUNA w/ DICED JALAPENOS	LOW		K/H	3.53 OZ	\$2.04	G	A			
6831	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE FRIED CATFISH IN SOUTHERN SAUCE			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$1.98	G	A			
6836	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE MACKEREL FILLET IN OIL			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$1.58	G	A			
6848	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE SARDINES IN OIL			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$0.94	G	A			
6868	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE SMOKED OYSTERS				3 OZ	\$2.28	G	A			
6874	FISHERMAN'S PARADISE FISH STEAKS IN LOUISIANA HOT SAUCE			K/H	3.53 OZ	\$0.93	G	A			
SOUP - PASTA - TORTILLA											
6550	HOSPITALITY MACARONI & CHEESE DINNER			K	7.25 OZ	\$0.73	G	A			
6912	NISSIN BEEF CUP - Combined Limit 30		NO		2.25 OZ	\$0.65	G	A			
6925	ALLEGRA ANGEL HAIR PASTA - Combined Limit 30	LOW	NO	K	16 OZ	\$1.34	G	A			
6933	DRAGON EXPRESS SPICY VEGETABLE RAMEN - Combined Limit 30			H	3 OZ	\$0.33	G	A			
6939	NISSIN CHILI RAMEN - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6941	NISSIN CHICKEN RAMEN - CLEAR - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6943	NISSIN ORIENTAL RAMEN - Combined Limit 30				3 OZ	\$0.29	G	A			
6996	WHEAT TORTILLA 6 CT	LOW	LOW	K/H	7.8 OZ	\$1.05	G	A			
6997	BUTTER TORTILLA 6 CT	LOW	LOW	K/H	7.8 OZ	\$1.00	G	A			
VEGETABLES											
6552	HOSPITALITY INSTANT MASHED POTATOES			K	13.3 OZ	\$2.86	G	A			
6749	TEXAS TITO'S BIG FAT JUICY DILL PICKLE K				6 OZ	\$0.77	G	A			
6756	EL PATO SLICED JALAPENO WHEELS PLASTIC JAR			K	12 OZ	\$1.64	G	A			
6761	STAR SPANISH OLIVES STUFFED WITH MINCED PIMIENTO				2.5 OZ	\$1.95	G	A			
SWEETENER											
6266	SWEETMATE PACKET - BLUE - ASPARTAME	NO	LOW		100 CT	\$1.85	G	A			
6267	SWEETMATE PACKET - PINK - SACCHARIN	NO	LOW		100 CT	\$1.85	G	A			
POPCORN - NUTS - TRAIL MIX											
6992	MR. NATURE PEANUTS ROASTED & SALTED	NO		K	3.5 OZ	\$0.75	G	A			
7005	ACT II BUTTER LOVERS POPCORN			K	2.75 OZ	\$0.64	G	A			
7007	ACT II KETTLE CORN			K	2.75 OZ	\$0.61	G	A			
7020	KAR'S MIXED NUTS WITH PEANUTS			K	10 OZ	\$3.90	G	A			
7026	KAR'S SUNFLOWER KERNELS			K	2 OZ	\$0.79	G	A			
7542	KAR'S ALL ENERGY TRAIL MIX			K	2 OZ	\$0.92	G	A			
PROTEIN BARS											
7440	PROMAX CHOCOLATE PEANUT CRUNCH BAR			K	2.64 OZ	\$1.48	G	A			
7447	PROMAX DOUBLE FUDGE BROWNIE BAR			K	2.64 OZ	\$1.48	G	A			

ATTN: Combined Max 4 pair of shoes equals: 1 pair of shoes, 1 pair of sandals, and 2 pairs of boots.

K=Kosher, H=Halal

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## Canteen Tools

Incarcerated people use accessible items to prepare meals.



ID card

=



Knife



Chip bag

=



Mixing bowl



Toilet

=



Refrigerator



Hair dryer

=



Oven

# 60%

of survey respondents said they could not afford commissary purchases

Corrections officials told us that inflated commissary prices are indispensable because the profits pay for things like gym equipment, educational programming, and other resources for incarcerated people that otherwise might not be funded.

Three-fifths of the formerly incarcerated people we surveyed said they could not afford commissary purchases, and 75% reported that access to food, including commissary items, was limited by their own or their family's finances. Many people have to choose between buying food and purchasing necessities such as toothpaste, tampons, and ibuprofen, or they go without extra food so they can make expensive phone calls to loved ones.<sup>7</sup> We heard stories of people so desperate for palatable food that they would trade sex for commissary items, form romantic relationships with others who could afford to shop at the commissary, or get involved in gang activity when commissary items were a reward. As one formerly incarcerated person said, “If you didn’t cook ... you starved.” One’s ability to participate in the informal prison economy also depends upon their ability to buy commissary items. Ramen soups are one of the popular forms of currency, for example, and are often used to “purchase” goods and services (such as homemade food items or bunk cleaning) from fellow residents.<sup>8</sup>

According to our surveys and interviews, people who could afford weekly trips to the commissary, thanks to support from loved ones on the outside, opted to skip the chow hall as often as possible. The packaged food they bought seemed safer and tasted better than the meals the prison provided. While cooking in prison with items purchased from the commissary has gained attention as a form of creative resistance to the depersonalization of prison, it doesn’t improve access to healthy food.<sup>9</sup> Most of what’s available for purchase is ultra-processed, filled with preservatives, and high in carbohydrates, salt, and sugar. Although many frontline staff in prisons and some corrections leaders assert that incarcerated people “only want to eat junk food,” our examination suggests that the poor quality of items for sale in the commissary is a big concern to incarcerated



Many people want healthier options, but when they inquire about stocking fresh fruits and vegetables they are told that it's impossible to safely store such items.

people. Many people want healthier options, but when they inquire about stocking fresh fruits and vegetables they are told that it's impossible to safely store such items and that healthier non-perishable foods would be so expensive that no one would buy them. During her time served in a West Coast facility, Alicia surveyed her peers about canteen inventory preferences on multiple occasions, gathering more than 1500 responses. But after compiling all that data and writing up a summary for the canteen manager, she was informed that the manager didn't have time to adjust the canteen product list.

The widespread belief that people in prison want only junk food is rooted in racist and classist stereotypes that Black and brown people, as well as people of any race from low-income communities, prefer unhealthy food.<sup>10</sup> When high-priced nuts, dried fruit, and the few healthier items commissaries occasionally stock don't sell, it seems to confirm this myth, but our research suggests that most incarcerated people simply can't afford them.

## AN ARGUMENT FOR INCUBATOR KITCHENS



COMMISSARY



PROGRAMMING



VISITATION



REENTRY

Some people turn cooking in prison into a thriving enterprise, albeit one that operates unauthorized by corrections staff. Longing for healthy, protein-rich snacks while serving time in a federal facility in California, former NBA basketball player Seth Sundberg concocted protein bars out of oatmeal, peanut butter, and nuts he purchased from the commissary. Before long, the bars were in high demand on the prison yard.

After his release, Sundberg started [Inside Out Goodness](#), a company that makes probiotic- and protein-packed snack bars for sale to the public. Sundberg is trying to persuade commissary supply companies to distribute the bars as a healthier alternative to most of what's sold inside prisons. There are numerous stories of creative individuals like Seth who fill a need for tasty food on the inside. Instead of suppressing their

hard work and contributions as illicit activities, why not sanction and support them by creating kitchen incubators inside prisons that give incarcerated people the space, equipment, and encouragement to exercise their culinary and business skills?

In a similar vein, prison restaurants open to the public, such as the Fife and Drum at Northeastern Correctional Center in Concord, Massachusetts, provide opportunities for culinary trainees to take pride in serving food made with care to others while re-humanizing incarcerated people in the eyes of the outside world. InGalera, a fine-dining restaurant at Bollate Prison in Milan, Italy, offers a space for its incarcerated staff to practice their culinary skills and interact with the public. It's run by a chefs' cooperative, expanding the program's capacity to empower participants with business knowledge and self-confidence to prepare them for their return to the community. Could these programs be expanded to include an in-facility restaurant where incarcerated people could spend their commissary dollars on well-prepared food while supporting their peers, or a café where families could purchase appetizing meals to share during visitation?

**In most visitation areas the only food available is from vending machines stocked with unappealing, unhealthy, and overpriced snacks.**

### Food and family

There is another place and time in prison where food plays a role in the life of an incarcerated person: during family visits. In life on the outside, members of a family routinely connect over food—from nightly dinners to elaborate holiday meals. When people visit a loved one in prison, sometimes traveling great distances, it is a special occasion, one that a shared meal would greatly enhance. Unfortunately, in most prisons visitors are not allowed to bring outside food into the facility, and the few exceptions to that rule can have strict and confusing limitations.<sup>11</sup>

In most visitation areas the only food available is from vending machines stocked with unappealing, unhealthy, and overpriced snacks. “There were chips, honey buns, sometimes sandwiches your family could buy and heat up in the microwave, but there was no telling how long they’d been sitting there,” or if the vending machine would be working, Rosa recalled. The whole experience, she said, could end up becoming just another source of disappointment, guilt, or shame.

## A REAL FAMILY DINNER



VISITATION



REENTRY

Some corrections leaders recognize that family meals can play an important role in the lives of people while they're in prison. Annette Chambers-Smith, Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, believes that “sitting down at a table with food and having conversation is what maintains healthy relationships.” When Tim Buchanan, then warden of Noble Correctional Institution in Caldwell, suggested holding a cookout for soon-to-be-released individuals and their families, Chambers-Smith applauded the idea.

In September 2019, Buchanan invited relatives of five incarcerated men to an outdoor lunch they would prepare and eat together. As partners, children, parents, and siblings joined their incarcerated loved ones to grill, eat, and clean up, the experience strengthened their relationships. Pleased with the success of the inaugural cookout, Buchanan hopes it will be repeated.

Chambers-Smith sees this cookout as just the beginning. She envisions trailers for families to come together for an entire day, cooking meals together, cleaning up afterwards, just enjoying one another's company, and “Grandma can show you how to make that strudel or whatever the case may be.” Providing an opportunity to come together regularly with loved ones over a meal is a practice that could be widely adopted. Sustaining strong connections between incarcerated people and their families can boost well-being for both parties, and maintaining such connections has been shown to reduce rates of recidivism after release.<sup>12</sup>

Incarcerated individuals and their families deserve more than sodas and overpriced chips during the time they have together. Affordable, healthy meals should be available during visitation. Likewise, creating a pleasant, cafe-like atmosphere in the visitation room would increase a sense of normalcy and dignity. Activities like parent-child cooking classes could also strengthen family bonds and provide an opportunity to reinforce healthy eating practices.



The fundamental human urge to offer support and comfort through food persists inside the prison gates.

### “Everything in prison revolves around food”

One of the many ironies of prison is that in an institution where the food is generally awful, food is still at the center of life. “Everything in prison revolves around food,” Alicia emphasized. In a bleak, regimented environment where both boredom and tension reign, mealtimes break the monotony and structure the day. For better and worse, food is woven into the tribulations and tiny respites of life behind bars. It is taken, given, traded, and occasionally savored. Michelle still thinks about her birthday in prison when a few friends threw her a surprise party with a cake made of pudding stolen from the kitchen and crushed cookies from the commissary.

For a time while Alicia was incarcerated, she ran an unsanctioned business cooking and selling churros and other desserts, for which the other women eagerly traded their own practical services and commissary goods. “Food brings people together,” she said. The fundamental human urge to offer support and comfort through food persists inside the prison gates, Alicia reminded us: “When someone is sick, you want to bring them soup; when someone is sad you want to bring them cake.” Food takes its usual place in the rituals of mourning and celebrating those who have passed on. On June 22, 2020, Michael Thompson, Robert Cannon, Jr., Parker Sineora, and William Welch—all incarcerated at the Muskegon Correctional Facility in Michigan—spent hours preparing an elaborate, physically-distanced meal for 50 of their peers to honor the lives of George Floyd and countless others lost to police brutality.<sup>13</sup> Thompson reflected, “We are not allowed to protest. However, food has a way of bringing about three words, Love, Peace, and Happiness.”

### NEXT UP

#### PART 4: THE PRISON FOOD MACHINE

*In the next installment of Eating Behind Bars, we look behind the scenes at the operational policies and practices that determine the quality of food in prison.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Versteeg, R. I., Stenvers, D. J., Kalsbeek, A., Bisschop, P. H., Serlie, M. J., & La Fleur, S. E. (2016). Nutrition in the Spotlight: Metabolic Effects of Environmental Light. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* (75), 451-463. [Link here](#)
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