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Food cultures in U.S. prisons – three original recipes

Currently, more than two million people live behind bars in the United States (Sawyer, Wagner 2024). Many of them will spend decades – if not their whole life – in the prison system. Living under the strict constraints of correctional institutions, they produce practices and rituals entirely foreign to the outside world. In fact, the process of othering is already apparent in the differentiation between “the internal and the external world” (Cunha 2014, 227), or the inside and outside, commonly made both by scholars and by the incarcerated themselves. To the outside world, incarceration is almost invisible (unless you are somehow affected through family or work). Therefore, the significant body of fiction produced on the topic often depicts prison life in a rather clichéd manner (e.g. in the popular television series *Orange is the New Black* [2013]).

Apart from sensationalised media outcomes, incarceration is also a significant topic in academic literature. Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1979) marks a milestone in research and theory about the penitentiary system, and to this day the prison is the focus of many studies in psychology, criminology and sociology (an extensive bibliography is provided by Lorna Rhodes [2001]). In recent years, much research on the prison system comes from a place of activism (e.g. Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* [2010]) or tries to understand the historical and social contexts of mass incarceration (see Gottschalk 2015). The discipline of anthropology, however, has not produced such an extensive amount of scholarship, as it is understandably difficult to conduct (and get permission for) research in that constrained environment. As Rhodes points out, the conditions of participating and observing are very limited, thus the desirably self-reflective outcome is very rare (Rhodes 2001, 72).

As a facilitator of creative writing workshops in correctional facilities in Pennsylvania, I am less interested in studying the people I collectively write with. I am not interested in self-narratives and essays of self-reflection, as many

programmes offered inside seem to be (see for example Smith-Pennick 2021), but try to focus on the everyday and seemingly mundane aspects of prison life. Journaling about the sensory impressions such as sound, smell, and taste, the workshop participants reveal the constraints of their environment and their personal strategies to live despite them. Therefore, we collectively create an “archive” of prison life; an obvious example being the food culture behind bars, which is different in many respects, and constitutes a crucial element of prison culture.

Meals in prison are highly regulated, and a form of control and expression of authorial power (Godderis 2006). In my experience, the food served on a daily basis is extremely unhealthy, consisting of meat and condiments such as what one participant of my classes called “mystery sauce” – a non-definable substance that accompanied the meat that day. One inmate at the State Correctional Institution in Mercer, Pennsylvania, describes the food in the following way:

Orange peels, apple peels and my favorite white seedless grapes I have not had in 25 years because of the time I am serving. [...] Shredded Beef, Ramen Noodle Soup, spicy vegetable kind. Jumbo Iced Covered Honey Bun, Saltine Cracker and for drink, Strawberry-Watermelon Drink Mix. Questioning why I am diabetic with so much nutritiously valued food stuffs eagerly consumed. On a good day, we find some fish, tuna. Mackerel, which is expensive on a prisoner’s salary, maybe settle for sardines in red sauce over a bed of Ramen noodles; as this is about as healthy as can be in this environment of staying alive inside a warehouse full of human beings (Jeffrey S., personal correspondence, February 8, 2024).

Most of the food Jeffrey is describing is bought in the commissary. What seems like a possibility is likewise limited to a selection of processed foods (Fig. 1).

Having access to neither a kitchen nor cooking utensils, the incarcerated population has to be inventive to satisfy their dietary desires. This starts with creating a cooking device, as Rafael explained to me in a letter:

Heating devices vary from person to person, prison to prison, state to state. Dry heat is created by makeshift ovens made in a box with lightbulbs. Please only do this if you know about electronics and if it is not a big infraction if caught. In PA, the cooking device is wet heat with a stinger. Created with an extension cord with a metal piece (usually a nail clipper) attached to the end of a split cord. Please be

sure that the two metal pieces NEVER touch or you will blow the power (Rafael, personal correspondence, March 7, 2023).

Pennsylvania Correctional Industries

MALE GENERAL POPULATION

See policy for return and replacement terms.

Prices are subject to change without notice. All quantity limits are in accordance with the DC ADM-815.

Item #	Description	Quantity Limit	Price
Category: SOUPS			
00003	RAMEN NOODLES CHICKEN FLVR 3OZ	None	0.38
00004	RAMEN NOODLES CHILI FLVR 3OZ	None	0.38
00006	RAMEN NOODLES TEXAS BEEF FLVR 3OZ	None	0.38
00007	RAMEN NOODLES HOT/SPICY VEG FLVR 3OZ	None	0.38
00008	RAMEN NOODLE LOWER SODIUM BEEF FLVR 3OZ	None	0.38
00009	RAM NOODLE LOWER SODIUM HOT/SPY VEG 3OZ	None	0.38
00011	RAMEN NOODLES CAJUN CHICKEN 3OZ ***	None	0.38
Category: BEVERAGES			
00804	NONFAT DRY MILK 10OZ ****K,H	None	2.79
00806	GATORADE FRUIT PUNCH 7.5OZ ****K,H	None	1.90*
00810	HEALTH SHAKE CHOCOLATE 2OZ ****K	None	1.33
00811	HEALTH SHAKE VANILLA 2OZ ****K	None	1.33
00818	WYLER'S LIGHT SF LEM LIME 10PK****K,H/A	None	1.33*
00819	TEA W/ LEMON & SUGAR 19OZ ****K,H	None	3.03
00820	KA TROPICAL PUNCH 12OZ ****K,H	None	1.92*
00821	KA WATERMELON/STRAWBERRY 12OZ ****K,H	None	1.92*
00822	ORANGE BREAKFAST DRINK 12OZ ****K,H	None	1.92*
00824	COUNTRY TIME LEMONADE 12OZ ****K,H,GF	None	1.76*
00832	WYLER'S SF STRAWBERRY PNCH W/CAFF 6PK****K	None	1.22*
00833	TAMPICO SF MANGO PUNCH 6PK****K	None	1.17*
02800	HOT COCOA 10OZ ****K,H	None	1.50
02807	MAXWELL HOUSE COFFEE 4OZ ****K,H	None	3.61
02810	FRENCH VANILLA CAPPUCCINO 10OZ ****K	None	1.35
02814	100% COLUMBIAN COFFEE 5OZ ****K,H	None	4.92
02816	DECAF FREEZE DRIED COFFEE 3OZ ****K	None	3.19

Fig. 1. Department of Corrections. Commissary Lists. Male General Population. 2024. Excerpt.

A detailed description of the heating device was also published by Temporary Services (Angelo 2020).

Ingredients are limited to food served during the meal plan and the available, highly processed foods in the commissary. In some prisons, there is an underground market for other ingredients, yet the choices are restricted and very expensive.

In the following, I share three original recipes shared by men incarcerated in Pennsylvania that represent not only American cuisine in its own right, but also the type of comfort food that is created despite all the constraints. I made very few editing changes to the recipes, making sure they reflect the instructions the way the men gave them, sometimes having their peers, sometimes an outsider in mind. A large part of the ingredients for those recipes comes from the previously mentioned commissary. But not only the ingredients are very prison-specific, so

are the measurements. One butter, for example, refers to the custom-size mini-container of butter handed out to the inmates (and on the outside in fast-food restaurants or hotel buffets). The lack of an available heating source further limits the cooking possibilities.

However, in one of the recipes the adventurous options are described in more detail. Inmates who can cook and create these dishes are highly valued and often sell their food to other inmates, even creating a secret catering business (not approved by prison authorities) behind bars. The first recipe comes from such a catering business by Tyrone S. in the State Correctional Institution Chester, PA. For a little while, Tyrone was running a small in-prison restaurant business called Mr. Platters. He offered several dishes and delivery until the business was shut down by the Department of Corrections (DOC) (personal correspondence, April 30, 2023). The cinnamon rolls were part of the menu.

Prison Cinnamon Rolls

1 loaf of bread (26 slices)
10–15 butters
3–4 prison plastic spoons of cinnamon
4–6 ounces of sugar
1 pinch of salt
1 milk
vanilla cookies

Remove all the edges from the bread and place the whites in a large mixing bowl (the edges can be used to make other dishes or you can discard them). Break the bread into small pieces and add the milk. Smash the bread and form it into a giant dough ball (gloves would be ideal if you can get them). Place the dough on a clean chip bag and knead until flat. Once flat, spread the butter on the dough evenly. Do the same for the cinnamon and finally the sugar. Roll the dough into a tube shape. Once it's rolled, cut the dough evenly into 12 small rolls. Let sit for 1–2 hours so dough can expand. Place a chip bag with the rolls in your stinger (prison oven) for 2–3 hours (prison ovens cook slower). When the rolls are done, sprinkle a pinch of salt over the top of the rolls.

Icing: Take all the icing from 1/3 of a pack of vanilla cookies. Add with 3–4 packs of butter. Add a drop of milk and place into stinger. When thick, drizzle over tops of the rolls before you eat them.

The next recipe by Anthony makes the best out of items on the commissary list, as well as available materials which might cause some concern on the outside (trash bags) but are utilised for cooking purposes on the inside. When Anthony sent me this recipe (personal correspondence, January 20, 2023), he was incarcerated in SCI Waymart, PA:

Jail House Fried Rice

1 bag of rice (brown or white)
3 soups (preferably chili or spicy)
3 fried eggs chopped into small pieces
2 cheese bars 1 provolone and 1 cheddar
2 mackerel (canned) or any type of fish
2 hot sausages cooked well until all they're fried
2 or 3 sugar packages to remove bitterness
1 small bottle of honey
½ carton of milk

- Pour rice into a small trash bag, with all your soups and sugar packs and shake so it mixes well
- Chop your eggs into small pieces and drop them into the bag
- You want to fry your sausages until all the grease is gone dry
- Chop your sausages into small chunk-bites and chop your cheese bars into the same sizes, so you can taste your cheese bites
- Drain your fish oils into the trash bag, so you'll have that fish oil taste mixed into your rice and soup
- Now mix your meat into the bag with one season flavor package
- Shake everything up into the bag allowing air to fill the bag like a balloon, tie your knot after leaving air and drop it into your stinger water
- Take half of your cheese bites and make a cheese sauce with a bag from the rice using half of a carton of milk
- After your rice is cooked fried and your cheese sauce is ready in about 45 minutes check it momentarily and shake it up like a bag of kernel popcorn until the rice is fried and everything is mixed well
- Use gloves and a paper cup to pour your rice and cheese on top

The last recipe comes from Rafael who, at the time of the correspondence, was also incarcerated in SCI Waymart. However, Rafael had been moved around the

Pennsylvania prison system, thus knowing a number of facilities and writing with a reader in mind who may not be familiar with the specificities of prison cooking.

Jail Bird Nuggets (Buffalo or Honey BBQ)

1 pouch of pulled chicken breasts or 4–5 chicken quarters from the chow hall
1 bag of chips (hot chips or BBQ for honey BBQ version)
¼ sleeve of Ritz (or off brand) snack crackers
2tbsp of flavorful liquid (whatever is available; hot sauce, BBQ, Asian sauce, soy sauce etc. nothing creamy)
Seasonings (salt, pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, chili powder [whatever is available])

Sauce

¼ cup hot sauce or BBQ sauce (hot sauce can be a jailhouse version or actual hot sauce from commissary, outside orders, or the prison underground market)
2 tbsp honey / 3 tbsp for honey BBQ
2 tbsp strawberry jelly
10 butter packs

Open top of chip bag, careful not to rip bag. In bag crush chips until mostly dust. Crush crackers until dust and add to chip bag. Add seasoning.

Add pouch of chicken, drained if necessary. If using chow hall chicken, be sure to pick from bone and shred until only small chunks left.

Add the flavorful liquid and shake up bag, gently massaging the bag until chicken and liquid is completely rolled into chip mixture.

Using a book, press bag down on a flat even surface. Press down until the chip bag is filled with a flat block about ½ inch thick. Flip the opening up and tape down.

Carefully sit bag flat in cooking bucket or whatever food is cooked in. Cook for 20–30 minutes in dry heat or 1 hour in wet heat.

Remove from heat, rip open chip bag neatly and sit on flat surface to cool for 30 min. While cooling, in a separate bowl, mix sauce ingredients, leaving out the butter. Mix well, then add butter. Place a lid on bowl and heat 10 min.

Take sauce off heat, stir well, let sit for 15–20 min. Cut chicken block into about 2-inch squares. Once sauce cools and thickens, roll chicken squares in sauce and place back on an open chip bag.

25 or so minutes before ready to serve, place open chip bag with nuggets in pot

bucket and heat for 20–30 minutes depending on strength of heating device.

Serve with dipping sauce of your choice.

Suggested sauce (creamy garlic)

Mix mayo, sugar, garlic powder, parsley or oregano, and a drop of milk. Add any of these ingredients until desired taste is achieved. Add milk and stir until desired thickness.

These three recipes allow for a glimpse into the food culture behind bars in the United States. I would like to encourage all readers to prepare one of the dishes themselves in a truly shared manner. I would like to conclude with an American sentence by Crystal who, at the time of writing this article, was incarcerated in SCI Muncy, one of the two female facilities in Pennsylvania. An American sentence is a poetic format following the constraints of a haiku. However, instead of being composed of three lines, the American sentence consists of 17 syllables that form one sentence. This format, introduced by Allen Ginsburg, is at the core of one of the writing projects that I moderated together with Jayne Thompson.

Commissary truck arriving. She says: “Peanut butter box is here”.

I am much indebted to the men sharing their recipes with me, as well as to Jayne Thompson, who introduced me to prison teaching many years ago, and Taneisha Spall, who allows me to cooperate with the Department of Corrections and helps facilitate creative writing workshops in the prison system. The recipes by Rafael, Tyrone and Anthony were included in a modest publication issued by the Pink Gorilla Institute in 2023 in a limited edition of 50 copies (Zittlau 2023).

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