

“TASTES LIKE FREEDOM”: FOOD, IDENTITY, AND
COMMUNITY IN CARCERAL SETTINGS

by

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This thesis explores how food is a mechanism for constructing identity and community in carceral settings. Drawing from the existing literature, I focus my analysis on noninstitutional foodways – the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food that is not sanctioned by the prison administration. I establish what foodways exist outside of the institutional purview, and then examine how these noninstitutional foodways are sources of identity reclamation and community building. This work is grounded within an interdisciplinary framework that brings in relevant scholarship from a wide variety of social sciences, with the goal of providing a comprehensive point of view. Ultimately, I argue that food is a powerful site for identity and community to be formed and re-evaluated, often times through the mechanism of resistance, within the context of prison.

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I would also like to thank Truitt, currently incarcerated in Oregon, for inspiring the title of this thesis. As a part of my internship with the UO Prison Education Program (PEP), I attended a graduation ceremony in prison two years ago for three incarcerated individuals who were graduating with Bachelor's Degrees from the University of Oregon. At that ceremony was a cake that was brought in from the outside. Truitt, an incarcerated student I knew, was eating the cake, sitting next to me during the ceremony. I was asking him what he thought of the cake and he turned to me and said, "it tastes like freedom." That quote stuck with me and inspired me to write this thesis on

food in prisons, and title it as such.¹ I am thankful to Truitt, and every other person I met behind bars, for showing me the common humanity that exists in us all.

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¹ I have received Truitt's permission to use his words as the title of this thesis.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Introduction

Food is sustenance to our bodies, but it is also so much more than that. It is the feeling we get when we come home to the smells of our grandmother's cooking; when we engage in thoughtful conversations with our loved ones over a meal; when we learn how to cook a recipe that has been passed down through generations. Food is symbolic, it is not just a compilation of calories and nutrients. Food is also political. What we eat, how we eat, who we eat with are all reflections of our sociopolitical worlds and the identities and communities we hold within them. This thesis is an in-depth examination of how food operates in carceral settings, or prisons and jails. In carceral settings, the ability to make choices about food is largely absent from the lives of people incarcerated². Individuals are deprived of many of their basic rights when they are incarcerated. Prisons restrict incarcerated peoples' freedom of movement within the institution, their ability to choose what they wear, what to eat, what to watch on television, etc. The United States carceral system is largely designed to strip individuals of their humanity by regulating their choices in a harsh, controlled environment.

This thesis is an evaluation of how food, specifically food that is not sanctioned by the prison administration³, has the capacity to build and reinforce a sense of identity

² In this thesis, I have chosen to use the term "incarcerated people" or "incarcerated person" to refer to people housed behind bars. There is an ongoing debate about what to call people who are behind bars. Common terms include "prisoner," "inmate," "person incarcerated." In that debate, there are a multitude of viewpoints that support the use of each term, including a diversity of viewpoints expressed from those who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using "incarcerated people"/ "incarcerated person" because I believe it is a term that centers the person rather than their placement within an institution. See Hickman (2015) for a further analysis on this terminology.

³ A further explanation of "non sanctioned food," otherwise termed as "noninstitutional foodways," will be provided in the *Definitions* section.

and community among people incarcerated. In this research I define the foodways that exist outside of the main institutional channels of the prison and examine how these foodways operate as a mechanism for incarcerated people to acknowledge and assert their sense of identity and community. This thesis will address noninstitutional foodways that exist in the following categories: cooking in the cell, eating in the visiting room, prison food and health, and prison kitchens.⁴

Definitions

In this thesis when I refer to the term “foodways” I am referring to the behaviors that are related to the acquisition, preparation, distribution, and consumption of food. In the discussion of food, anthropologists and sociologists have largely categorized the conversation into two differing perspectives. The first perspective asserts that food is a mechanism through which social meaning is constructed and the second focuses on how food practices change over time in response to biological, environmental, and technical factors (Smoyer 2019). In this thesis, I am adopting the first perspective that views food as a signifier for larger phenomena of social relations.

In my discussion of foodways, I differentiate between institutional and noninstitutional foodways. I define institutional foodways as the acquisition and consumption of food through prison-sanctioned processes. In other words this refers to prison food that is served by the prison to people incarcerated as their legal obligation to feed the population, such as the food served in chow halls.⁵ Noninstitutional foodways refers to the procurement, preparation, and consumption of food that is not sanctioned

⁴ These categories will be the topic of the each main chapter in this thesis.

⁵ Chow halls are highly politicized spaces where social and political relations are negotiated (Valentine and Longstaff 1998).

by the prison. Often these foodways involve breaking the rules of the institution to procure and consume food that prisoners have chosen, rather than the institutional foodways that allow for little agency in the preparation and consumption process. A popular example of noninstitutional foodways is buying ramen noodles from the prison commissary to prepare a meal. The distinction between institutional and noninstitutional foodways has been referred to in other literature as “formal and informal” (Godderis 2006) or “official and hidden” (Ugelvik 2011) foodways.

This thesis focuses on the context of carceral settings, referring to prisons and jails. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing more of my attention on prisons as representations of carceral settings, since most of the literature on this topic revolves specifically around the prison setting, but I will not discount notable studies conducted in county jails. In regard to the geographic scope of this thesis, I am centering my research on U.S. prisons. I will, however, be referencing literature that takes its data from studies of food culture in non-U.S. prisons. Many of the most renowned studies (Ugelvik 2017, Godderis 2006, Earle & Phillips 2012) on food in prisons were conducted outside of the U.S., and although my work focuses on the U.S., I would be doing a disservice to this research by omitting those studies. There are also identifiable similarities to the structure of prisons that allow for research outside the U.S. to be applied on a limited basis to the findings of my research.

Research Questions

This thesis seeks to answer the following questions: what foodways exist outside of the institutional foodways of carceral settings? This question will identify and examine the various foodways that are not sanctioned by the prison. Secondly, how do

noninstitutional foodways build and reinforce an incarcerated person's sense of identity and community? This question focuses on the experience of people incarcerated and how identity and community are crucial aspects of how food operates in carceral settings.

Background

Food and Identity

Food is integral to the very core of our being as humans and our food choices can communicate a great deal about our identities. Food choices can tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, trauma (Almerico 2014). The act of eating is a daily affirmation of one's social and cultural identity (Kittler, P.G., Sucher, K.P., & Nelms 2012). There is also a great deal of comfort that comes from eating food deeply connected to the experiences that contribute to the formations of our identities. The connection between food and identity is further emphasized within communities of color. Fischler (1988) observed that in communities of color, certain features of cuisines were sometimes retained even when the native language had been forgotten. Food so often connects people to their heritage, and as recipes are passed down through generations, food becomes a powerful legacy of one's culture when other traditions or practices have been forgotten.

Food also has the capacity to expand our knowledge of our own identities in a unique way. Boutaud, Becuț, and Marinescu (2016) state:

The relation to food and culture translates the tension that defines our identity construction between finding refuge in a frame, in order to

retrieve our own being, and escaping from this frame and discovering oneself throughout new worlds of flavors and sensations. (p. 1)

The act of eating can be a place of immense comfort, solidifying the identities we have constructed for ourselves. Eating can also bring us into new spaces in a way we would not have discovered otherwise. Hauck-Lawson (2004) explains that what one eats or chooses to eat communicates aspects of a person's identity in a manner that words alone cannot. One of the goals of this thesis is to demonstrate the unique role food plays in our lives, highlighting the significance it holds in shaping and reinforcing our identities.

Food and Community

We have all heard the phrase "breaking bread," but do we ever stop to consider what that phrase actually means? Colloquially we use that phrase to mean making friends by sharing a meal together, but it means so much more than that. Sharing a meal with someone creates an environment of intimacy, one which can build bonds of trust, cooperation, friendship. Fishbach and Woolley (2017) conducted an experiment to test the effects of eating with others and what happens when people eat the same food, or when they eat different foods. They discovered that when people ate the same food, it fostered a sense of trust between them (shown by the study participants agreeing on a scenario), while eating different food did the opposite (study participants took much longer to come to an agreement on a scenario). This study points to the capacity of food to build and reinforce a sense of community.

Communities can also unite around specific foods that hold significance. Bak (1997) writes about how certain foods become deeply intertwined with a group's identity:

Food is literally subsumed into the bodies of human beings and, given that it is shared with one's family, colleagues, or friends, that eating together unifies people. Consuming the staples that grow in one's native soil further reinforces the idea of oneness with fellow diners. (p. 138)

“Breaking bread” builds a sense of collective identity and “oneness.” It also has the ability to create a sense of collective belonging among people who may not share many similar interests or personal identities. Food is a mechanism for unification and community building and operates as such in many different spaces.

The Setting of America's Prisons

The U.S. incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation in the world (“Prison Population Total”). In the 1970s, the Nixon administration used thinly veiled racial rhetoric to spearhead the “war on drugs” that targeted poor black and brown people, dramatically increasing the number of people in prison. It was during the Reagan administration that the prison population spiked dramatically by almost doubling in number in the eight years of Reagan’s presidency. Some historians cite the war on drugs as the catalyst for the era of mass incarceration, while others cite a rise in violent crime rather than drug crimes that spurred harsher sentencing laws and increased prosecutorial power (“The United States of Incarceration”). Since 1970, the prison population has increased sevenfold to over 2 million people in jails and prisons today, a number that far outpaces population growth and crime. The policies that fueled the start of the era of mass incarceration were rooted in a familiar narrative: “one involving public anxiety about both actual and alleged criminal behavior by racial and ethnic minorities and the use of state punishment to control them” (Delaney, Subramanian, Shames, et al. 2018).

In the criminal justice system, marginalized communities, specifically black and brown communities, are overrepresented. One out of every three black boys are expected to go to prison in their lifetime, while one out of every 17 white boys are expected to do the same. The legacies of the Jim Crow Era are still seen today in the U.S.'s prison system. Acclaimed writer and civil rights advocate, Michelle Alexander, refers to mass incarceration as the "New Jim Crow." Alexander points out how the system of mass incarceration acts as a barely masked system of racialized social control that functions quite similar to Jim Crow (Alexander 2010). In recent years, rates of incarceration have dropped substantially but the racial disparity in prisons is still so vast that the downward trend in incarceration can barely be considered worthy of celebration.

Mass incarceration hurts everybody. It hurts the individual who goes to prison, the friends and family members who have to lose a loved one, taxpayers who have to pay for the prison system to operate, the children of people incarcerated who have a significantly higher chance of ending up in the system, and the communities that are caught up in a cycle of loss. Out of all that hurt, mass incarceration has not made a significant impact of keeping communities safe. While crime rates have dropped substantially since the 1990s, studies suggest that the influx of imprisonment as a tool to combat crime has not played a major role in the decrease of crime (Lynch 2007; Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson 2009). The structure of America's prisons as sites of punishment rather than places of rehabilitation or growth contributes to the revolving door of people coming back to prison after they have been released (Simon 2007). In addition, the increased use of lengthy sentences given to young people does not reflect the research

on people tending to “age out” of crime as they get older. We are putting more people in prison for longer periods of time, and it is extremely costly and not an efficient way to ensure public safety.

Eating in Prison

The average sentence of a person sent to prison in the United States is three years, that’s more than 3,000 meals they will eat behind bars (“Time Served in State Prison” 2016). For the most part, prison meals⁶ are high in salt, sugar, and refined carbohydrates, while being low in essential nutrients. Fresh fruits and vegetables are rare, and it is not uncommon for a person in prison to be served rotten or moldy food. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2015) reported that incarcerated people suffer from diabetes and heart disease at higher rates than the general public. Part of the reason people in prison are served such low-quality food is because of the cost. Most states spend under \$3 per day to feed one person in prison, while one state spends as little as \$1.02 per day. Prison food also perpetuates health inequities due to the disproportionate number of low-income communities of color that are incarcerated. It is these communities that typically do not have access to healthy food, and also these communities that are most represented in the U.S. carceral system (Soble, Stroud, Weinstein 2020).

The setting of chow halls can be extremely hostile places to eat. Official mealtimes are a collective affair where incarcerated people are ushered into large chow halls, often with bleak lighting and mold on the walls, and served sub-standard food.

⁶ When I use the term “prison meals” I am referring to the institutional foodways that are sanctioned by the prison.

Chow halls are also places of heightened violence because one is highly visible to the peering eyes of correctional officers and other incarcerated people. Outside of chow halls, incarcerated people can access food at the facility's commissary, also known as the canteen in some prisons. A typical commissary sells a variety of snack foods and non-perishable condiments, and some more substantial packaged foods like macaroni and cheese, canned tuna, tortillas, ramen noodles. Many facilities also allow family members and friends to send boxes of packaged food (through approved vendors) into the prisons to incarcerated people (Soble, Stroud, Weinstein 2020).

As I have already established, food is a powerful mechanism through which people express their identities and form community with others. In prison, the symbolic power of food is amplified because "consumption is a recurring act and, within the context of a total institution, life is acts that are done on a consistent and repetitive basis" (Godderis, 2006, p. 62). Ugelvik (2011) finds:

Their [incarcerated people] status as spouse, son, lover and father is replaced by their status as prisoner and criminal. Being a loving breadwinner no longer, the prisoner has to eat what the prison staff slop on a plate and put in his cell. The pains of imprisonment are thus partly experienced through the food of the institution (p. 48).

The experience of incarceration can be examined through food and how incarcerated people engage with it. In this thesis, I will be examining noninstitutional foodways as sites of identity construction and community building — processes with positive connotations to them. Given that, I would also like to acknowledge the extensive ways that food can act as a form of punishment within prisons. Earle & Phillips (2012) found that "prison food is popularly regarded as part of the punitive armory of the prison experience" (p. 144). Institutional foodways in prisons eliminate all elements of personal choice in the eating process. Additionally, most prisons prohibit the use of

personal spices or condiments in chow halls, further curbing the ability of incarcerated people to construct their own identities in prison (Soble, Stroud, Weinstein 2020).

While food can be a source of punishment with which the institution can use to oppress and control the lives of incarcerated people, it can also be a source of agency, identity construction, community building, and resistance for incarcerated people.

A positive relationship with food is something that can easily be taken for granted in the outside world, while it is largely denied to incarcerated people on a daily basis. This thesis serves to explore the foodways that exist outside institutional foodways, however limited they are, framing these options as positive spaces of identity reclamation and community building. This thesis also works to center the experiences, perspectives, and lives of those incarcerated. While I will address the mechanisms of control the institution uses to strip incarcerated people of their basic rights and access to healthy, whole foods, I focus more attention on the opportunities incarcerated people have to assert their agency, claim their identities, and build healthy communities. This approach serves to humanize incarcerated people and demonstrate opportunities for empowerment through food, rather than following an approach that prioritizes incarcerated peoples' identities as "prisoners" or "inmates."⁷

⁷ I also want to acknowledge that my position as a researcher comes with an entire set of privileges. If I were doing in-person fieldwork in prisons it would be even more important for me to set up the necessary structures to be able to engage in this research ethically and intentionally. As I am not doing field work, I would still like to recognize that I am ingrained in the academic world that is fundamentally based in privilege and exclusion. I acknowledge my responsibility as a researcher to represent these communities in a holistic, transparent, and genuine manner, and that is a goal I strive for in all my research.

Methods

In this thesis, I am grounding my research in the existing literature. Under ideal circumstances, this research would be conducted as in-person fieldwork in prisons, centering the voices of those currently incarcerated and their eating practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the daily realities of life have shifted dramatically. The capacity of research under these restricted circumstances has been much more limited, and that is why I chose to engage with this topic through the existing literature, rather than through fieldwork.

My research is also interdisciplinary in nature. I refer to the relevant scholarship in food studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, and ethnic studies. I refer to this scholarship with the understanding that all of these fields of social science are deeply intertwined and in my research of the symbolic nature of food in prisons, they must all apply.

Much of the existing literature surrounding the topic of food in prisons is based on studies conducted in prisons outside of the United States. As I mentioned in the “Definitions” section, I will be referring to those studies only for the purpose of identifying the types of universal⁸ relationships incarcerated people have with food, since the focus of my research will be in U.S. prisons. In focusing my research on U.S. prisons, my research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the power of food in carceral settings in the United States.

⁸ The experiences of people in prison are by no means universal. I would like to acknowledge the deeply individual experiences people have with incarceration. By referring to “universal relationships between incarcerated people and food,” I am making a generalized statement about common perspectives shared by people incarcerated in regards to how food operates within these settings.

Within the literature on food in prisons, there has been extensive research done about the nutritional value of prison food (Smoyer 2013; Soble, Stroud, Weinstein 2020; Smith 2002; Fisher, Parry, Snow 1988), food as a means of resistance within prisons (Ugelvik 2017; Godderis 2006; Smoyer 2019; Earle & Phillips 2012; Murguía 2018), and food as mechanism for the constructions of identity and community (Ugelvik 2017; Smoyer 2019; Almerico 2014; Brown, Timler, Varcoe 2019). My research will be building upon the existing literature to narrow the focus to noninstitutional foodways in prison. In my construction of the definition of noninstitutional foodways, I limit my scope to the ways in which food leaves the peering eyes of institutionally sanctioned spaces and becomes something new under the agency of the incarcerated person engaging with it. I hope my research will be able to amplify and expand on the existing literature, while forging new pathways for exploration and analysis.

Chapter Two: Cooking in the Cell

Cooking food in your cell is one way for an incarcerated person to avoid eating the institutional food served in the chow halls. This method of noninstitutional food preparation recently gained widespread social media attention when Jeron Combs, currently incarcerated in a prison in California, started a “TikTok⁹ cooking show” right from his cell. Combs uses a makeshift grill made from his metal bed and a hot plate from a broken oven. He cooks anything from burritos to burgers to rice bowls, and he learned to cook for the first time while he was incarcerated. In an interview with the Daily Mail, he spoke about his passion for cooking and how he is able to share that with his cellmate and friends by making food for them on special occasions (Crump 2020). I highlight Combs’ story for the aspects of identity and community that are communicated through his prison cell cooking. Even though Combs did not know how to cook when he entered prison at the age of 18, he learned the skill and now has developed a true passion for it, something integral to his identity. He also uses food as a means to form community with the people he cooks for. In this chapter, I will examine the setting of cooking in the cell as a noninstitutional foodway, identifying the ways it reinforces identity and community.

Ugelvik (2011) identifies three levels of noninstitutional foodways, or “hidden food” as he calls it. The first level of noninstitutional food he identifies is transforming institutional food, or “official food,” into something more familiar and edible. This often involves using the condiments one has purchased from the commissary to make the food from the chow hall more flavorful. Gustavo Alvarez, formerly incarcerated

⁹ TikTok is a social media platform where users can post short videos to the public.

author of *Prison Ramen: Recipes and Stories from Behind Bars*, stated that incarcerated people frequently take food from the chow hall back to their cells, often violating prison rules. He said that he often snuck back bits of beef stroganoff from the chow hall, washed it off, and mixed it with the ramen he had in his cell to make a completely new dish (Reutter 2018). The levels described by Ugelvik (2011) are based on the level of risk an incarcerated person is taking by breaking the institutional rules regarding food. This first level carries a relatively low risk, and the food can often be prepared and consumed away from the watching eyes of correctional officers. For those of racially marginalized identities, the transformation of institutional food to something more familiar is crucial to reclaiming a part of their identity they held before incarceration, when their identity was not so intimately wrapped up in the control of the carceral system.

Institutional food often reflects the dominant culture and leaves no room for the cuisines native to BIPOC¹⁰ identities. Valentine & Longstaff (1998) found that “the power of food to dramatize the distance from home is most keenly felt by prisoners from ethnic and religious minorities” (p. 135). Given that the U.S. prison system disproportionately incarcerates BIPOC communities, it is significant that the institutional meals fail to adequately serve the demographics of its population. Additionally, they found that “the prison meals represent one example of a process of ‘Othering’, marking those who do not share a taste for this food as ‘different’, in which difference is constructed as negative and inferior” (Valentine & Longstaff, 1998, p.

¹⁰ The term BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It is an inclusive term used to represent the distinctive histories of Black and Indigenous communities alongside people of color. See Garcia (2020) for more information about the use of the term.

136). By taking the institutional food and transforming it into something else, an incarcerated person rejects the ‘othering’ placed upon them by the dominant culture of the institution and reclaims their ethnic and cultural identity through food.

The second level of noninstitutional food that Ugelvik (2011) identifies is simple cooking that happens in cells. This type of cooking often involves heat, like the heat from a lamp inside the cell or from stripping the wires from electrical devices, used to warm up foods and do very easy cooking. This second level carries a higher risk of getting in trouble. The third level is food preparation that is explicitly forbidden by prison rules and carries a very high risk if caught. An example of this level is making an improvised camping kitchen in the cell to do more involved cooking. Incarcerated people who attempt to engage in this level risk the potential of being sent to segregation¹¹ or facing other disciplinary measures if caught.

The second and third levels of “hidden food” are a form of resistance that incarcerated people utilize to assert their own agency against the confines of the institution. Smoyer (2013) found that “cell cooking was an activity of reinvention and repurposing that allowed inmates to resist institutional power by assigning new meanings to the prison food and commissary items” (p. 141). Ugelvik (2011) echoes Smoyer’s findings by showing that resistance done in the context of prison always carries meaning attached to that act of resistance. Take the example of Erol, an Albanian individual incarcerated in Oslo prison:

Erol commences the preparation of supper. Two large bags of grilled chicken legs are being transformed into a feast for seven... he turns on

¹¹ The term “segregation” refers to solitary confinement. There are many other terms, such as “the hole” or “SHU,” that are used to describe solitary confinement. The specifics of the terminology is based on the individual institution.

the music. His portable CD player is rigged to play through the small TV in his cell (another rule violation), and the sound of traditional Albanian folk music fills the cell... Erol is singing, dancing and smiling as he works. The food, the red flags, the music, the dance – it all comes together as a larger memory happening:

You know, this is a traditional Albanian meal I'm preparing, so of course we have to listen to Albanian music. It might seem corny, but sometimes I like to just listen to this music and have a good cry. It's better to cry in here, I can't be breaking up out there with the other prisoners, can't show that kind of weakness. In here, in peace, sometimes it's good to just let it all out. And it's nice to know that we can celebrate a little in here as well, like friends and family are doing on the outside (Ugelvik, 2011, p. 57-8).

Erol is engaging with food as a mechanism with which he accesses memory — memories of how he grew up, the types of food he ate, the kinds of music he listened to. In the grey, concrete walls of prison, where every action is influenced by the rules of the institution, Erol is finding space to reconstruct his own identity and build community with others. As Smoyer (2013) finds, “cell cooking was an activity of reinvention and repurposing that allowed inmates to resist institutional power by assigning new meanings to the prison food and commissary items” (p. 141). Cell cooking gives incarcerated people the opportunity to position themselves as autonomous beings with agency, community, and identity.

Prison Cake

I'd like to share with you all a prison cake recipe:

Chocolate Cake

Ingredients:

22 Oreo Cookies
7 tsp Non-Dairy Creamer
1-Cup Water
3 pkts mayonnaise
1 Hershey's Chocolate Bar

Directions:

1. Remove the cream filling from the Oreos cookies then set aside in a bowl.
2. Place the Oreos cookie parts into a bowl and crush into as small of pieces as possible. Set aside.
3. In a cup mix the creamer and water thoroughly.
4. Add all the creamer mixture except 1 tbs into the cookie mixture and mix thoroughly.
5. Add the mayonnaise packet to the cookie mixture and mix thoroughly.
6. Microwave the cake batter for 5 minutes or until the center is set. You'll know the center is set because the center won't wiggle when shaken. Let cool for one hour.
7. In a bowl with the crème centers add the remaining 1 tbsp of creamer mixture and Hershey's Bar. Microwave for 30 seconds. Stir thoroughly. This is the icing.
8. Drizzle the icing over the cake.



Figure 1: Prison Chocolate Cake Recipe

Here is an example of a prison recipe that takes ingredients from commissary. I tried out this recipe at home and it was much harder to make than it seems. I did not mix the frosting very well and it turned into a liquid mixture that made the rest of the cake quite soggy. The cake itself turned out relatively well and my roommates actually ate quite a bit of it. My takeaway from trying out this recipe is that I am quite impressed by the person who developed this recipe (because it does taste similar to chocolate cake) and their ability to replicate it (probably much better than I did).

An extremely popular form of cell cooking is called “spreads.” Spreads are meals that people incarcerated make themselves around a single ingredient, usually instant ramen noodles. Spreads have been the subject of books such as *Prison Ramen*, *Commissary Kitchen*, *Cooking in the Big House*, *The Convict Cookbook*, *Jailhouse Cookbook: The Prisoner’s Recipe Bible*, *From the Big House to Your House: Cooking in Prison* and *The Prison Gourmet*. Spreads are usually made from ingredients purchased at the prison commissary, but sometimes they also involve food smuggled back to the cell from chow hall, or ingredients purchased from kitchen workers who sell

onions, peppers, spices, meat or even sandwiches or pastries that are made in the institutional kitchen (Reutter 2018). Spreads also serve many purposes from forming community with other people incarcerated to trying to replicate people's favorite food on the outside with the ingredients available on the inside.

Cate (2008) studied the culture of spreads in a San Francisco County Jail and found that the act of spreading was a deeply social activity. In rare instances, someone would make a personal spread for themselves and maybe one other person, but more often spreading was something to share. Usually, the basic principles of reciprocity inform the making of the spread; if someone contributes an ingredient to the mix, they get food out of it. This is not necessarily a universal standard for everyone incarcerated. In Cate (2008)'s study, she found that sometimes people incarcerated spread with others simply because they do not want to eat alone, or they share with someone who does not have any money to buy food from the commissary (p. 19). Whatever the reason people choose to share their spread, breaking bread with others builds a sense of community and solidarity inside prison walls, just as it does outside of them.

The community that is built through the act of spreading is often racially defined. As one incarcerated person put it in Cate (2008)'s study: "In here the whites spread with the whites and the blacks spread with the blacks. It's kind of like having a barbecue on the outside, but it's not a barbecue. It's a spread" (p. 19). This finding is in accordance with other scholarship that demonstrates how prisons and jails are organized by racial groupings and how that influences who you eat with and the types of food you have access to. Chow halls are places that are largely defined by race in regard to where people sit and who they can talk to, but almost every part of prison functions in the

same manner (Blackwell 2020). In addition to the racialized communities that are built around the act of spreading, the types of food catered at the spread are also unique to the racial community. One incarcerated person in Cate (2008)'s study claimed he mastered the Asian "stir fry" that he made by heating peanut oil extracted from his lunchtime peanut butter and adding that to the cooked ramen noodles, mixed with leftover vegetables, meat from the kitchen, and hot sauce. Another story is captured by Joseph Watkins, an incarcerated person and trained chef:

African American inmates tend to use the oysters and clams, along with the Spanish rice and the standard ramen/ Cheetos/beef stick base to arrive at a jambalaya-esque creation, while spreads made by Latinos tend to have a combination of heat elements for a decidedly more spicy end result. If you intend to bring the heat and get your product the proper hue of 'red spread red' you must go the extra mile and use only Fire Hot Cheetos (Cate, 2008, p. 19).

Spreads can bring people out of the daily realities of prison and into an environment where community is prioritized and felt with others. For many, the act of spreading is a recreation of the type of food they ate at home, reminiscent of the cultural cuisines they grew up with. Spreading reflects the personal taste of an individual or a group and redefines the act of eating for those incarcerated to become something positive.

Cell cooking as a noninstitutional foodway is a mechanism that incarcerated people use to reclaim a sense of identity and community in carceral settings. The act of eating food created and prepared by oneself is an experience often taken for granted outside prison walls. By engaging in this practice, incarcerated people are positioning themselves in proximity to their experiences in the outside world, resisting the confines of the prison walls, and reclaiming how food operates in their lives.

Chapter Three: Eating in the Visiting Room

Another place where food plays an important role is in the visiting room.

Typically, when visiting family or friends, enjoying a meal together is a common and valued form of connection. When visiting a loved one in prison, being able to share a meal takes on a much greater meaning given the confined settings, but often that experience is restricted to a great degree by the prison administration. *Ear Hustle*, a podcast about the daily realities of life in prison told by those in prison, released a recent episode about prison visiting rooms where they highlighted how food plays into the dynamics of visiting. In that episode, Earlonne Woods, co-moderator of the podcast and formerly incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, talked about how visitors cannot bring their own food in, so the vending machines in the visiting room are often the only option for sharing a meal with your loved ones. Earlonne goes on to talk about the different vending machines, “You have the frozen food machine, then the soda machine, the coffee machine, like a bunch of things...And occasionally there’s fresh fruit or veggies” (Poor & Williams, 2021, 29:30). He then interviews Frank Jernigan, someone currently incarcerated at San Quentin, who goes into great detail about the culinary expertise of one “Chef Bucci” who would do amazing things with the burger vending machine:

And he might... we might get a salad that might have some onions on it, he put the onions on the burger. He might get an avocado. He might smear avocado on the burger. Or he would turn the avocado into guacamole. And... somehow knew how to just... make the most of mayonnaise and ketchup and mustard that was available and whatever else we could buy in the vending machine (Poor & Williams, 2021, 30:50)

The stories told on Ear Hustle give people a glimpse into what it is like to live inside a prison. I highlight this particular episode of Ear Hustle to show the role food plays in the visiting room, but also to showcase the ways that incarcerated people transform the institutional food (in the vending machines in this case) into an entirely different experience. Often the only thing one can do in the visiting room is talk and eat, so the experience of “breaking bread” becomes even more of a focal point in these settings. In this chapter I will explore the setting of visiting rooms as places where community is being reinforced and identity is being reclaimed.

Comfort (2002) conducted field observations in the visiting room at San Quentin State Prison and 50 in-depth interviews with women whose partners were incarcerated to better understand the way relationships are reshaped by the carceral experience. Comfort (2002) found that “women whose husbands, fiancés, or boyfriends are incarcerated attempt to involve their loved one in personal and family life by relocating various everyday activities into the prison visiting room,” (p. 467) including the act of eating together. When interviewed, women emphasized in great detail the lengths they would go to plan and organize the meals they would share with their incarcerated partners. When bringing outside food was not allowed, these women found a way around that rule. Take the example of Sarah who wanted to share her Thanksgiving leftovers with her husband:

After carefully enfolding flattened samples of various dishes in saran wrap, she distributed the packets around her thighs and stomach, holding the items in place with a pair of support pantyhose and cloaking the operation with loose trousers. Once she entered the visiting area, she went to the restroom and dismantled this veritable ‘moveable feast’, hiding everything in her coat pockets. Her next maneuver entailed buying a decoy article from the vending machine, dumping out the uneaten foodstuff from its shallow plastic container, and furtively

replacing it with the illicit turkey, stuffing, and side dishes. Successfully managing to heat the repast in the microwave, Sarah carried it (under the convenient cover of a paper towel) to her husband – who then found himself unable to lift a telltale forkful to his mouth due to the persistent vigilance of the correctional officers. ‘We were sitting there and it seemed like they would never look away, and the food was getting cold and the room was filling up, so I was afraid I was going to get terminated, and I was just feeling miserable,’ she remembers. Sarah’s husband, noticing her distress, asked, ‘What’s wrong, Babe?’ ‘I just want you to be able to eat your turkey!’ she wailed, almost in tears (Comfort, 2002, p. 479).

Sarah’s story showcases the efforts of loved ones on the outside to import “home” into the lives of those inside, reinforcing a feeling of connection and community with their partner behind bars. These women are also enacting their own identities as girlfriends and wives by providing nourishment to their partners even in the most restrictive of circumstances. Comfort (2002)’s observations highlight the capacity of food to reinforce feelings of community in the visiting room.

While visitors find illicit ways to make eating in the visiting room as positive of an experience as possible, the restrictions on food in the visiting room is one way that the prison asserts its control over those residing within its walls. Oftentimes visitors are not allowed to bring outside food, but when they are, there are strict and seemingly arbitrary rules that continuously change. Moran (2011) highlighted a case where a mother was bringing in food for her son into the prison, abiding by the weight limit requirement, and found out upon arrival that a new rule about fresh food being vacuum-packed had been introduced. Comfort (2002) found that,

Correctional authorities recognize the high value placed by visitors and inmates on food and therefore use the control of commensality as one of three key factors – along with the length of the meeting and the degree of bodily contact allowed – to structure the distribution of visiting privileges along the hierarchy of prisoner security levels (p. 475).

For all the ways that food holds the potential for incarcerated people to reconstruct their identities as separate from the institution and form community with those incarcerated and their loved ones on the outside, food can also act as a punishing experience in carceral settings. Godderis (2006) found that “since the ritual of consumption happens many times a day, it is under constant surveillance and acts as a key site for the disciplining of inmates’ bodies” (p. 62). Smoyer (2017) also writes about prison food as concrete and symbolic punishment. Corrections leaders may not be intending to “punish” people by serving them poor quality food, but the outcome is that incarcerated people end up feeling neglected, belittled, dehumanized by the eating experience, thereby compounding the negative experience of incarceration. Using food as a weapon to discipline rather than a tool to heal pushes incarcerated people further towards internalizing a “prisoner” identity.

In addition to sharing a meal with loved ones in the visiting room, there are some opportunities for visitors to come inside the prison and eat food with their incarcerated friends or family. In most prisons, a variety of different programs are available for incarcerated people to participate in — Toastmasters¹², gardening classes, lifers club, speech and debate¹³, cultural clubs, etc. In these programs, there are often opportunities for club members to serve food to outside folks when they come in. At Angola Prison, also known as Louisiana State Penitentiary, clubs make their own food and serve it to visitors during the rodeo events they hold on prison grounds twice a year

¹² Toastmasters is a public speaking organization that trains people to become effective communicators.

¹³ The story of how three people incarcerated in a New York maximum-security prison beat the debate team from Harvard in 2015 gained a lot of traction in the media. See Brody (2019) for details.

(Shelburne, n.d.). These types of opportunities are another way that food acts as a medium for forming community between the inside population and the outside world.

The culture around criminal justice reform has been changing as of late and some prisons are recognizing the positive potential of food for building community in the visitation room. The Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections believes that “sitting down at a table with food and having conversation is what maintains healthy relationships.” In September 2019, relatives of five incarcerated men were invited to an outdoor lunch they would prepare and eat together. The event was deemed a success and there was hope that it would be repeated again in greater scope (Soble, Stroud, & Weinstein, 2020, p. 67). While it is necessary to acknowledge the ways that food can discipline and punish incarcerated people, food should also be recognized for its powerful ability to reinvigorate relationships, strengthen community, and solidify positive identities within carceral settings.

Chapter Four: Prison Food and Health

Prison food is known to be terrible and lacking in nutrients. Fresh fruits and vegetables are rare, and in most prisons refined carbohydrates are served in excess to reach the mandated calorie count (Soble, Stroud, & Weinstein 2020). At Georgia's Gordon County Jail, incarcerated people are fed twice a day, about 10 to 14 hours apart. The jail claims they are providing a sufficient number of calories in their meal, but those incarcerated say that they combatted their hunger by frequently licking syrup packets and drinking excessive amounts of water (Santo and Iaboni 2015).

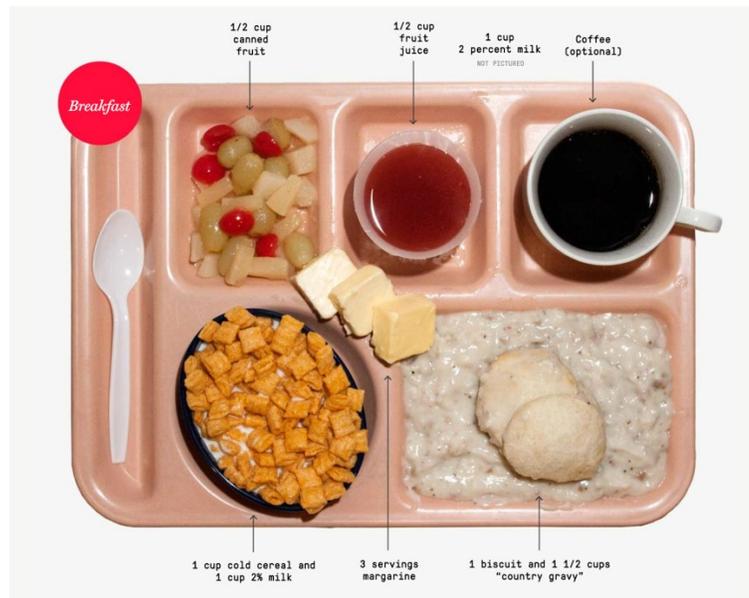


Figure 2: Typical Breakfast at Gordon County Jail in Georgia

More often than not, the institutional food offered in prisons is inadequate for a healthy diet and is usually a result of cost-saving efforts on the part of the prison administration. In this chapter I will be looking at the relationship between food and incarcerated peoples' health, and how "healthy" identities are constructed in restrictive environments.

Not enough attention has been directed towards prison food being a public health problem. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that even at its most reduced amount, the sodium content in prison food was almost three times the recommended upper limit (Ramanathan 2012). Incarcerated people in Washington do not receive their minimum requirements for fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, or milk (Sawyer 2017). In a report on prisons in Michigan, correctional officers reported frequent deviations from the standard menu, including watering down food and serving small portions, making it impossible for incarcerated people to get their necessary nutrients (Zullo 2016). All of these cases point towards a larger pattern in correctional institutions in the U.S. of not prioritizing incarcerated peoples' health or well-being.

The environment of prison is not made to produce healthy individuals. Studies have shown that incarceration is linked with accelerated aging, to the extent that some incarcerated people demonstrate health outcomes consistent with someone 10 to 15 years older than them (Kouyoumdijan, Andreev, Borschmann, et al. 2017; Chammah 2015). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, half of all incarcerated people in state and federal prisons reported having had a chronic illness and are potentially at risk for future medical problems, while 40% reported a current chronic condition (Maruschak, Berzofsky, Unangst 2015). Diet plays an important factor in incarcerated peoples' health outcomes (U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010), but that is not reflected in the types of food served to incarcerated people. In a recent analysis of criminal justice costs, it was found that correctional agencies spend almost six times more on health care than on food (Wagner

and Rabuy 2017). If even a small percentage of what is spent on healthcare were to be redirected to the cost of food, people would have access to healthier choices which would drive healthcare costs down significantly.

One of the main reasons prison food is so bad is because of the industrialization of prison foodways. Much of prison food today is not made from whole, healthy ingredients but comes from two large private corporations (Aramark Correctional Services and Trinity Services Group) that provide processed foods that only require reheating. Prison kitchens in Michigan and Ohio, under contract with Aramark, reportedly “served food tainted by maggots... rotten meat... food pulled from the garbage... [and] food on which rats nibbled” (Perkins 2016). In another case in Washington, when the Department of Corrections industrialized their food services by contracting with a private corporation, 95% of their locally prepared healthy food was substituted for plastic-wrapped, sugar-filled ‘food products’ (Sawyer 2017). The purpose of industrializing prison food services is to save money, but in so many cases it ends up doing just the opposite.

Along with increased healthcare costs due to poor diet, bad quality food leads to a slew of security problems. There have been countless incidents of hunger strikes or rule-breaking behavior by incarcerated people in protest of the prison diet (Sawyer 2017). Zoukis (2017) conducted a study linking inadequate prison food to bad behavior. In the study, young adult incarcerated males received a multivitamin and a fatty-acid supplement, or a placebo. During the testing phase, those that took the supplement had a 35% drop in disciplinary incidents and a 37% decline in violent behavior. Another study showed that “antisocial behavior in prisons, including violence, are reduced by

vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids with similar implications for those eating poor diets in the community” (Camplin 2016). There is an overwhelming amount of evidence demonstrating the strong connection between healthy diets and positive behaviors. Healthier and more balanced prison diets would not only be cost saving but could also encourage incarcerated people to adopt more positive identities and behaviors.

In response to the unhealthy food served in prisons, incarcerated people have to define for themselves what “healthy choices” are available to them. Smoyer (2013) studied prison foodways in a women’s correctional facility in Connecticut and found that women tried very hard to construct their identities around “being healthy.” One study participant went to great lengths to avoid the chow hall food after she learned that the protein substitute used in many of the dishes contained MSG:

‘I had to like make sure I didn’t pick the protein pellet. I had to pick the chicken. It was really hard.’ Her solution was to eat almost exclusively from the commissary during her 28-month incarceration, especially tuna and saltines. She talked at length about this decision, developing a food voice that was centered on health even though the food she ate to avoid the MSG (tuna and saltines) was not particularly healthy (Smoyer, 2013, p. 170).

Although this participant’s “healthy choices” were not particularly healthy, her avoidance of the institutional food in favor of food that she could choose represents incarcerated peoples’ effort to construct “healthy identities” for themselves. Another participant in this study reported similar thoughts:

I notice a lot of girls say when they get out they want to have McDonald’s ... but for me, I was concerned with eating the right thing. And I don’t know if it’s because I, it [prison] is a life-changing experience, and for me it was and I did the best I could there, and I want to change, and I want to, I’m starting to learn to love myself because that was what, what brought me there, was that I had no respect or love for

myself. And now I do and I want to be healthy and I want to eat healthy (Smoyer, 2013, p. 169).

In this participant's response, she is demonstrating a desire to take control of her choices and her identity despite the options available to her by the institution. Reflective in these narratives is the desire to claim a sense of agency in their food choices and their expressions of self to others and the outside world.

Another form of resistance against prison food that incarcerated people engage in is protests. Incarcerated people have long relied on hunger strikes as a form of protest to the dehumanizing conditions of prison. During the famous 1971 Attica prison riots, incarcerated people listed access to "a healthy diet" and "fresh fruit daily" as one of the demands of prison administrators (Prison Voice Washington 2016). In a prison in Michigan, the potatoes served in the chow hall were so bad one time that "prisoners when they got their trays to the table, they ate the rest of their food and dumped the potatoes on the floor. The whole floor was just covered in potatoes. That makes a risk for everybody that may slip and fall and stuff and something could happen in there" (Zullo, 2016, p. 24). Hunger strikes and other forms of protest are one way that incarcerated people resist the "inmate" title placed upon them by the institution by demanding better treatment and healthier food choices. These forms of resistance can also be empowering as individuals operate as a collective, asserting their like-identities as agents for change and owners of their own bodies.

Chapter Five: The Kitchen

Incarcerated people who work in the kitchen are often afforded more access to better food¹⁴. Greenwood (2009) offers his personal reflections about his experiences working in a prison kitchen during his incarceration. His first morning on the job he was given a homemade omelet to eat before the breakfast rush. It had caramelized peppers and onions, tomato, cheese, cooked with real butter, not margarine. While eating this omelet, Greenwood reflects on his experiences with food in prison:

I feel as though I've been participating in a taste deprivation experiment for the past two months and now been given real food. The result is that normal food has regained the power to dazzle. It is easy to forget how adaptive we are. I think about the sequence of my experience. At first, our daily fare had all the color and appearance of food, only with the taste erased. Next, that same food seemed to acquire some flavor, as if a knob had been turned up, though only a little. I realized that our tongues simply got better at finding it. Or maybe our brains learn to seek out taste, no matter how faint, as part of a process of recognition related to enzyme delivery, so we can enjoy better digestion (Greenwood, 2009, p. 68).

In the moment that Greenwood eats his first omelet is when he is reintroduced to food as something that can nourish and delight. I highlight Greenwood's experiences because it draws attention to the benefits given to kitchen workers in prison. In this chapter, I will be examining the role of kitchen jobs for incarcerated people, the increased access kitchen workers have to better food, and the ways that identity and community are constructed in this workplace.

¹⁴ Not all kitchen jobs in prisons are given the same types of benefits or level of access. The cases I bring up in this chapter are specific to the institution, but represent a general trend of incarcerated people who work in prison kitchens.

Register Items	Food (Limit 5 each)	Health Products (Limit 2 of Each)
Copy Card	Tuna (K) 2.75	Gas-Ex Cherry 5.60
Picture Tickets (limit 10)	Salmon 2.95	Aspirin - Generic 100 1.60
	Chicken 3.60	Tylenol Antibiotic Ointment 4.40
Stamps (Limit \$9.40 Total Value)	Mackerel 1.25	Band-Aids 0.65
Book of Forever Stamps 9.40	Summer Sausage 1.55	Ben-Gay Ointment 5.20
Book of 10 - .01 0.10	Shredded Beef 5.85	Carmex Lip Treatment 1.70
Book of 10 - .10 1.00	Spam 1.25	Chapstick 3.70
Book of 5 - 1.00 5.00	Beef Bites 2.30	Prilosec Omeprazole 10.50
	Turkey Bites 2.30	Allergy Relief 1.60
	White Rice 0.95	Generic Claritin, Loratadine 2.60
	Brown Rice 1.20	Acne Treatment 1.60
	Nacho Cheese Rice (K) 1.45	Cough Drops 0.80
Specials (Limit 1 - Write in flavor)	Whole Kernel Corn 1.40	Eye Drop 2.05
Ice Cream	Pepperoni Slices 2.30	Hydrocortisone Cream 1.25
	Pizza Kit 3.65	Hemorrhoid Ointment 3.85
	Taco Mix 1.95	Insulin 2.50
	Tortillas Corn (5 Total) 1.00	Medicated Chest Rub 2.40
	Tortillas Flour (5 Total) 1.30	Metamucil Powder 6.50
Drinks	Tostitos Corn (2) 2.40	Milk of Magnesia 2.15
Bottled Water .5L 6pk (2)(K) 3.75	Refried Beans (3) 1.30	Maximum Strength Antacid 3.40
French Vanilla Cappuccino (2)(K) 1.40	Chili Beans (3) 1.45	Pepto Bismol - Generic 2.60
V-8 Juice (5) 1.15	Beans and Chorus (3)(K) 2.05	Generic Zantac, Ranitidine 5.15
Gatorade (5) 0.90	Oatmeal - Cream Variety (1) 3.15	Saline Nasal Spray 1.85
Cranberry Juice(5) 1.20	Oatmeal - Plain (1) 1.90	Tums 3pk 2.20
Drink Mix - Sugar Free Bpk (5) (Limit 1 of Each)	Sweetened Cheese (2) 2.55	Tylenol - Generic 2.35
Taster's Choice (K) 7.80	Sharp - Spicy Cheese Stick 1.90	Multivitamin 1.90
Coffee Regular (K) 2.70	Creamy Peanut Butter (1)(K) 2.55	Calcium 2.05
Coffee Decaf (K) 3.30	Cereal (1) 1.95	Vitamin B-150 3.25
Rotating Coffee 3.35	Rotating Meat 2.55	Vitamin E Gelscaps 2.55
Decaffeinated Tea 1.80	Rotating Spread 2.20	Nuprofen Pain Relief 5.50
Caffeinated Tea 1.80	Rotating Block Cheese	Cough Decongestant 2.20
Hot Chocolate Regular (K) 3.75		
Hot Chocolate - Sugar Free (SF)(K) 1.80		
Nestle Iced Tea (K) 2.00	Snacks	Dental Products (Limit 1 of each)
Non-Fat Milk Instant (K) 3.00	(Limit 3 Total)	Close-Up Toothpaste 1.50
Cherry Drink Mix (K) 2.15	Nacho Cheese Chips 1.50	Colgate Toothpaste 1.50
Drink Mix (K) - Rotating (Limit 3 Total)	Plain Tortilla Chips 1.90	Sensodyne Toothpaste 6.75
RC Cola (2)* 2.35	Pretzels 1.80	Dental Floss 1.25
7-Up (2)* 2.25	Rotating Potato Chips (Limit 1 Each)	Denture Bats 1.95
Diet 7-Up (2)* 2.35	Rotating Chip	Denture Toothpaste 4.05
Rotating Soda (2)* (Only 2 of one kind)	Vanilla Wafers 2.10	Denture Brush 4.40
	Snack Crackers 2.05	Fluoride Adhesive 1.30
Candy (Limit 3 of each)	Cinnamon Honey (Graham) (1) 2.15	Mouthwash 1.95
Hershey's Chocolate Bar (K) 1.70	Rotating Crackers (K) (Limit 2 Each)	Toothbrush Medium 1.00
Hershey's Almond Bar (K) 1.70	Rice Cakes (2) 3.85	Toothbrush Soft 0.95
Caramels 1.00	Oreo Cookies (2) 2.10	Toothbrush Holder 0.50
Jolly Ranchers - Assorted 0.85	Rotating Cookies 2.10	
Jolly Ranchers - Fire 2.10	Raw Almonds (K) 3.00	Cosmetics (Limit 1 of each)
Starlite Mints 0.85	Deluxe Mixed Nuts 8.15	Blush Brush 4.10
Licorice (K) 1.30	Trail Mix(3) 3.10	Cosmetic Bag 5.50
Sugar Free Candy 3.75	Cashews - Salted 1.80	Eye Brow Pencil Brown 2.65
Rotating Candy Bars (5) 2.70	Prunes 2.70	Eye Liner - Liquid Black 6.05
Rotating Candy 1.95	Marshmallows 1.95	Eye Liner - Liquid Brown 6.05
	Padding 4pk (K) 2.00	Mascara -Black 6.90
Soup (Limit 10 Total)	Olives (5)(K) 1.35	Mascara Waterproof 7.30
Salsa Picante Shrimp (Cup) 0.55	Park Rinds (5) 0.95	Lipstick - Color 5.60
Thai Noodle Soup (Chili) 0.70	Popcorn (5) 0.55	Bronzer - Color 4.50
Ramen 0.25	Dried Fruit (3) 3.00	Blush 4.50
Beef _____ Chicken _____ Rotating	Party Mix 3.00	Eye Shadow 7.40
	Pop Tarts (4) 0.55	Eye Lash Curler 5.85
	Rotating Pastry	Liquid Make Up 10.60
	Granola Bars	Sharpener 6.55
Condiments (Limit 2 of each)	Protein Bars (5) 1.75	Make Up Remover Pads (Limit 2 of each)
	Breakfast Bar, Rotating(10)	AAA Battery 4 pk 1.45
		AA Battery 4 pk 1.45
		D Battery 2 pk 1.75

Figure 3: An Example of a Commissary List

This commissary list is from a federal prison in California. It gives an overview of the types of food and items sold at typical commissaries and the relative price points. If you consider how little incarcerated people are paid for their jobs, the prices of items at commissary can be considered quite expensive and inaccessible to many people.

In Smoyer (2013)'s study in a women's prison, the women talked about how kitchen jobs were one of the most coveted work assignments in the institution. This was the case for a number of reasons including being able to get out of the units, getting a decent meal, having access to a wide range of foods, having extra portions at mealtimes

(Smoyer 2013). Kitchen jobs are not usually the highest paid prison jobs¹⁵, but the access to better and more food was often valued more than the small wage. Women in this study also emphasized the benefits of being able to eat food that was not prepared for the general population and having access to table seasonings and condiments they would not otherwise have been able to use. For the most part, having a kitchen job means you've "made it" in prison because of the resources that you have access to.

Kitchen jobs are also representative of a certain status, one that comes with access to ingredients that can easily be smuggled out of the workplace. In a place where cash is no longer the primary form of currency, food becomes a highly valued commodity. A participant in Smoyer's study (2013) described how food gets in and out of the kitchen:

'You can also make a hustle from working in the kitchen. Like dried onions, butter, cheese, cereal, sugar, seasoning – all of that right there is just money.' Unlike at the entrance/exit to the cafeteria, kitchen workers reported that they were not regularly searched on the way to and from work. 'A big block [of butter]. They wrap it up, like a lot of people, cause you wear, like the little cook's, chef coat, and they put it in that, wrap it up, and just walk with it, you know' (p. 87).

The ability of kitchen workers to smuggle food out of the workplace and into the cell blocks or dormitories reflects their privileged status in the prison. Greenwood (2009) writes about how after he got his job in the kitchen, people would just come up to him and hand him a shopping list of things to get for them. Often in cases where people ask kitchen workers to smuggle ingredients for them, they let them join in on whatever meal the ingredients are meant for. In chapter two, I discussed the making of "spreads." An

¹⁵ The average wage for an incarcerated worker is between \$0.14 and \$0.63 an hour for a "non-industry" job, while industry jobs (jobs in state-owned businesses) pay \$0.33 to \$1.41 per hour on average. See Sawyer (2017) for more details.

integral part of making spreads is access to better and more unique ingredients that kitchen workers have access to. By smuggling out food, kitchen workers position themselves in opposition to the prison, defining their identity in congruence with that positionality. Kitchen workers also supplant their identity as “prisoners” by engaging in the simplest act of being human, sharing food with others. The formation of community and identity are both byproducts of incarcerated people working kitchen jobs.

Along with the access to better food, kitchen workers work in a highly trafficked area, providing a means of contact with people living in almost all parts of the institution. Greenwood (2009) describes the intricate system of passing notes in the prison kitchen:

Several kitchen workers have made arrangements to have their notes hidden on trays according to the sequence in which they go out. Say, for example, that the baker’s friend wants to get a note from him. She would leave a note under her tray that a confederate would pick up when the trays are collected after the meal. Somewhere on it her note would have the number ten, let’s say, which would mean that she would maneuver herself into the tenth position in line, thereby getting the tenth tray, which would have Dave’s note already tucked into the paper napkin. This system requires the complicity of the line workers, who are all too happy to cooperate, given the baker’s ability to pay them with cinnamon buns and other treats (Greenwood, 2009, p. 73).

Even under the surveillance of correctional officers, incarcerated people find ways to subvert the authority of the prison and engage in forms of communication, however complex it may be. Dave, an incarcerated person that Greenwood met while in prison, works in the kitchen making baked goods and found a particularly creative way to communicate with people he was not allowed to. There is a women’s unit in the prison that Dave is at, and when the women come to the chow hall for meals, a piece of cardboard is placed on the serving window by correctional officers to block the kitchen workers’ view of who they’re serving. Working in the back of the kitchen, Dave found

a “secret spot” that gives him a direct line of sight into the dining area. In this spot is where Dave met his girlfriend, someone from the women’s unit who would exchange glances and notes with him every day at the same time. It is hard to imagine a romantic relationship where the two people have never spoken to each other or officially met. Dave, however, has found a way to connect with another person despite the restrictive environment. Food, and the access to it, opens up a wealth of possibilities and potentials. Working in the kitchen is what allowed Dave to start his romantic relationship, and it is often the place where people feel most connected to their outside selves, the people they wish to be outside of prison.

Working in the kitchen also allows someone access to healthier food choices. In chapter four, I discussed how some incarcerated people construct their identities around their efforts to be healthier. These efforts contributed to the construction of their “healthy identities,” even if the choices they were making were not actually benefiting their health. Making healthier food choices becomes easier when you have access to more and better food, such as someone who works in the prison kitchen.

Novisky (2018) conducted a study interviewing 193 older men incarcerated in three prisons across the U.S. to find the ways that these men protected their health inside, including seeking out work placements that allowed them to do that. Novisky (2018) uses a cultural health capital framework — the concept that skills and behaviors learned by the patient in health settings can improve health outcomes (Shim 2010) — to assess her results. One of the study participants, Thomas, had diabetes and high blood pressure and struggled to avoid the types of starches that would accelerate his condition since they were served so frequently in the chow hall. To try and control his diet and his

health, he ended up skipping meals frequently and lost a significant amount of weight. He reported, however, that it was much easier for him to “manage his diet when he worked in the kitchen because he could substitute foods like noodles with healthier options such as tuna fish” (Novisky, 2018, p. 659). In this study, because Thomas had a valued job working in the kitchen, he was able to deploy his cultural health capital to a greater degree. Thomas knew the types of foods he needed to avoid to protect his health and was able to avoid them to a certain extent while he had his kitchen job. In this way, Thomas and many others are constructing their autonomous identities (in the kitchen) within the context of food and its ability to nourish and protect the body.

Chapter Six: Final Thoughts

Conclusions

In this thesis, I address how incarcerated people's engagement with noninstitutional foodways has the capacity to construct, strengthen, and reinvigorate identities and a sense of community. In my analysis, I address two research questions: (1) what foodways exist outside of the institutional foodways of carceral settings? (2) how do noninstitutional foodways build and reinforce an incarcerated person's sense of identity and community? The topic of each chapter outlines the noninstitutional foodways that exist in prisons in jails. These foodways are by no means all-encompassing, they are simply the most prevalent foodways that exist across many prisons and jails and therefore warrant inclusion in my research. There are many other ways, though less documented, that incarcerated people engage in the preparation and consumption of food outside of, or hidden from, institutionally sanctioned environments. Woven into each chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the aspects of identity and community that are reinforced through noninstitutional foodways.

Chapter two focused on cooking in the cell as a noninstitutional foodway. Drawing from Ugelvik (2011)'s work on mealtime resistance and identity work in a Norwegian prison, this chapter analyzed the different methods involved in cooking in a prison/jail cell and extended the analysis to point towards the identity work and community building being done in those settings. Cooking in the cell serves to construct incarcerated people's identities as autonomous individuals with the power of choice. Asserting this agency, incarcerated individuals give themselves access to food as memory, food as a reflection of cultural identities, and food as a means to bring people

together. Cate's work (2008) highlights the power of food to build community by showcasing how making "spreads" in the cell to share with others allows incarcerated people to "break bread" with each other, joining in community over a shared meal.

Chapter three was about eating in the visiting room. Most visiting rooms do not allow visitors to bring in food, and if they do there are extensive rules about it. Comfort (2002) reported the extreme measures that people, specifically wives or girlfriends, would take to bring food into the visiting experience, such as saran wrapping food to one's body. In the efforts of women to bring food in for their significant others, they reinforced their identities as wives and girlfriends taking care of their partners. In addition to reinforcing their identities, smuggling food into the visiting room served to bring the incarcerated person closer to the outside world, metaphorically transporting them outside of the prison walls.

Chapter four made the connections between prison food and one's health. The food served in chow halls in U.S. prisons is notoriously bad, giving incarcerated people few options to make healthy food choices. The experience of incarceration has been proven to accelerate the aging process largely due to the unhealthy, processed food that is served. With extremely high healthcare costs and frequent occasions of violence (i.e. incarcerated people getting into fights or other violent conduct), prison administrations could benefit from serving healthier, more balanced food, since the outcomes could be incredibly cost saving. In addition, Smoyer (2013) provides an account of how incarcerated women shape their identities around their "healthy choices," through only eating commissary food or skipping meals, even if those choices are not truly good for their health. The element of choice is crucial when it comes to the ability of incarcerated

people to assert agency over their food decisions. More formal mechanisms of resistance, such as hunger strikes, are also methods that incarcerated people use to claim agency over their identities and build community in resistance.

Chapter five centered around the prison kitchen and the privileges that come with working there. Working in the kitchen is often a coveted job in most prisons because of the increased level of access to more and better foods. With this access, kitchen workers are able to feed themselves better, communicate with people across the institution, and smuggle ingredients out for themselves and others. Greenwood (2009) recounts the experience of eating an omelet for the first time since his incarceration, and that experience being due to his position working in the kitchen. He also explains how he smuggled food out of the kitchen to give to other incarcerated people making a spread, a meal he was allowed to partake in because of the resources he provided. The kitchen is also a unique space within the institution because it is highly trafficked by people from all parts of the prison, allowing for pathways of communication (such as passing notes) to open up. Incarcerated people were allowed to assert a greater sense of agency and autonomy while working in the kitchen.

Making the Noninstitutional Institutional

This thesis focuses on noninstitutional foodways to center the narrative on those incarcerated and the acts of resistance, identity reclamation, and community building that they engage in. Based on the findings from my research, I can conclude that the benefits seen from incarcerated people engaging in noninstitutional foodways, could also be seen if institutional foodways provided greater spaces for incarcerated people to construct their own identities and build community with others. For example, creating a

portable stove in your cell to cook a meal reminiscent of your mother's cooking would not have to bear the same fear of disciplinary authority if more prisons had self-cook areas. In some places, allowing incarcerated people to cook their own food is already the norm. In Norway, prisons ascribe to a model focused on rehabilitation rather than punitive punishment¹⁶, and therefore give their residents a lot more freedom, including the ability to cook. At one prison in Norway, incarcerated people are able to visit the prison grocery shop weekly to buy anything from snacks to dairy products to meat that they can store in the minifridges in their cell until they are ready to prepare it (Benko 2015). In Norway where noninstitutional foodways (as defined in the U.S.) show up as foodways that are deeply ingrained into the model of the institution, incarcerated people do not have to live in fear of the consequences of engaging in simple things like cooking their own meals.

The framework of the “noninstitutional becoming the institutional” can apply to all of the topics that have been covered in this thesis. To look at chapter four and its focus on health, one can see that by providing a wider variety of healthier options through the chow hall, incarcerated people would not have to construct their healthy identities around eating tuna fish and saltines, but rather tie their identities to whole, nourishing ingredients. In chapter three about eating in the visiting room, people would be able to strengthen relationships with their loved ones over a shared meal if the rules around eating were less restrictive. In chapter five about the kitchen, many of the benefits gained from working in the kitchen would become more widely accessible if

¹⁶ Norway's prison model is known throughout the field of criminal justice to be extremely successful at decreasing rates of recidivism, or the rate at which people reoffend. Their model is focused on rehabilitation and they typically offer a greater variety of services and programs to their population.

there were other cooking spaces in the institution and if there was better food being served to the population.

In acknowledging the benefits that could arise from “decriminalizing” a lot of the illicit behavior that incarcerated people engage in around food, I also recognize that this is not a “one size fits all” framework. Resistance to the institution, whether that be through hunger strikes or smuggling food from the kitchen, was a central mechanism through which incarcerated people constructed their identity as separate from the prison and separate from the title of “inmate.” If there were no longer rules or structures to resist, would people lose a part of their identity that was wrapped up in resistance? Given that the incarcerated population is not a homogenous group, individuals that assert their identity and form community through resistance may continue to do so, even if the institution provided greater access to food. The Nordic model, however, demonstrates the potential for incarcerated people to have more positive relationships with identity and community that are not reliant on resistance.

Looking to Existing Food in Prison Programs

While there is still tremendous work that needs to be done in institutionalizing healthier, balanced, nourishing food for incarcerated people, there are programs that currently exist that give people the opportunity to engage with food in a positive way. At Northeastern Correctional Center in Massachusetts, Fife and Drum Restaurant is staffed by incarcerated people and open to the public. It is the only restaurant in the country that is located on prison grounds and has been inviting the public into the institution for meals for over 30 years. The restaurant is a part of the prison’s culinary arts program that gives the incarcerated men an opportunity to grow their skills as

cooks, bakers, dishwashers, and waiters. The program aims to prep students for real kitchen jobs after their release while also decreasing rates of recidivism (Hunt 2015). When interviewed about the experience, Issac, head chef at the restaurant in 2017, said that the opportunity to work at Fife and Drum enabled him to not only hone his skills as a cook, but also regain a small sense of normalcy because of his exposure to the outside world with customers coming to the restaurant (Zagat 2017). Programs like the Fife and Drum Restaurant represent the potential for institutionalized programs to teach valuable skills around food, encourage positive identities associated with food, and allow stronger relationships with the outside community.

Another successful food program is the Rikers Island Horticultural Therapy Program. Thanks to an innovative partnership between the New York Department of Corrections and The Horticultural Society of New York, residents of Rikers transformed a two-acre plot on the jail grounds into the nation's first prison horticultural therapy program and the nation's oldest and biggest prison garden. With both outside beds and a greenhouse, incarcerated individuals working with the support of trained horticultural therapists maintain a garden year-round. The crops change every season, depending on the desires and design of the students participating at that moment in time. The curriculum and related programming engages over 500 incarcerated individuals, including both the juvenile and adult population, across five gardens with 160 raised beds. With the aim of providing job skills, life skills, and supporting reentry, the program claims to have reduced recidivism by 40% and generates up to 417 pounds of organic fruit and vegetables a year (The Hort 2017). In a New York Times article extolling the programs, one participant was quoted as saying that, "It is almost certainly

the only place on the island where the incarcerated call the shots” (Schiffman 2019). That quote underscores the importance of the garden as a space for the creation of agency and personal autonomy in the carceral setting. In the garden, incarcerated people are given the power to decide (with the collective) what plants to grow and how to manage the garden.

In both of the previous examples in Massachusetts and New York, these programs were made possible by the compliance of the Department of Corrections. In order to portray a more complete picture of the issue, it is important to acknowledge the perspective of corrections leaders in trying to change the culture and access of food in prisons. Soble, Stroud, & Weinstein (2020) interviewed corrections staff and leadership across the country:

While a few state that they were content with their food service operations, we most frequently heard that departments were constrained by financial resources — preventing them from purchasing better and fresher food, adequately staffing kitchens, updating or purchasing new equipment, or all of the above (p. 116).

A constrained budget is almost always the reason given from corrections leaders as to why they cannot offer better food. As mentioned before in the chapter about food and health, investing in better food could be a cost-saving measure in the long term by decreasing healthcare costs when people have access to healthier food choices.

Another obstacle to institutional change is the prevailing attitude in corrections that the status quo is fine when it comes to the prison food experience. The group of corrections leaders that support a more holistic approach to food is growing in number, though it still remains small. Randall Liberty is one of those people. Liberty became Commissioner of the Maine Department of Corrections in January 2019 and oversaw positive changes in the amount of fresh, local food served in the prisons. Commissioner

Liberty emphasized, “Our job is about rehabilitation, redemption, and getting busy healing those wounds. Our job is to reduce the frequency of future victims. Our job is to help these men and women back to society” (Soble, Stroud, Weinstein, 2020, p. 117). Annette Chambers-Smith, Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Director, also believes in encouraging healthy relationships with food. At one of the prisons in Ohio, Chambers-Smith vision is a reality:

At the Noble Correctional Institution, each housing unit has its own small garden that residents plant, tend, and harvest, sharing the produce and eating it when they wish. Some units have George Foreman grills, toaster ovens, and prep tables that accommodate more cooking from scratch than microwaves and electric kettles, which are the only equipment available to people in most prisons. ‘Security risks are always weighed, but there is real value in a person preparing food on their own terms,’ explains Noble’s former warden, Tim Buchanan (Soble, Stroud, Weinstein, 2020, p. 111).

Corrections leaders have the power to leverage their authority to create positive changes in the food culture of prisons, and many believe in that vision. Many prisons already have programs in partnership with community organizations that offer opportunities for incarcerated people to engage in positive relationships with food, but they typically only serve a small part of the population. Investing in bettering institutional foodways, accessible to all incarcerated people, should be a priority.

In recommending a framework that prioritizes the institutionalization of better and healthier foodways, I acknowledge that this places my research within an inherently reformist perspective on the criminal justice system in the United States. In scholarly and activist spaces, there is an ongoing debate about the need for reform versus abolition regarding the carceral system. Ruby C. Tapia, co-editor of *Interrupted Lives: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* (2010), defines the debate as, “Reforming the prison entails changing its existing practices to make the system a better

one. Abolishing the prison entails dismantling it wholesale. Reformers object to how the prison is administered. Abolitionists object to the prison's very existence." To institutionalize better foodways in prison is a step to reform the prison system, rather than dismantle it. Reform and abolition, however, do not have to be mutually exclusive. There are some actions in prison reform that work towards the long-term goal of abolition. A key component of abolition is investing in marginalized and underserved communities to prevent them from being funneled into the prison system, but the people who are currently in the system cannot be forgotten in that process. Investing in bettering the lives of those currently incarcerated helps reform the system, while also working towards a world where there is no longer a need for prisons. Increasing incarcerated people's access to quality food serves both the short-term and long-term goals of reformist and abolitionist perspectives, respectively.

Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitation of this study was the inability to gather data from field research in prisons and jails. As mentioned in the first chapter, this limitation was due to a combination of factors including the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the extensive process of getting approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to work with vulnerable populations, and the limited access I would have to those living in prisons and jails. In addition to the limitation of not being able to conduct field research, I was not able to access all of the scholarly works focused on food in prisons. There were numerous studies published on platforms that restricted access to them without a paid subscription.

Future Directions

For future research, I recommend that an examination of food and its connections to identity and community be conducted as an in-person field research study that interviews incarcerated people housed in every part of the institution. Additionally, there has not been enough research conducted on foodways in restrictive housing units in prisons. These places, such as disciplinary segregation, psychiatric units, and death row, contain very different foodways than those accessible by the general population, so should require research focusing specifically on them. Overall, a significant portion of the relevant literature is based in prisons outside of the United States, specifically in European countries. Future research on food in prisons should be conducted across a wide variety of prisons *and* jails in the United States that represent various security levels¹⁷ and population sizes, in order to get comprehensive results that reflect a degree of universality.

Significance

The foodways that we engage in are reflections of our social, political, and cultural selves, not just the ways we provide sustenance to our bodies. In understanding how we engage with food, we can understand more about our identities, environments, cultures, and communities. By applying an analysis of food to carceral settings, this thesis provides unique insight into the food choices that are made by incarcerated people and how those choices are symbolic of one's sense of self. It is important to consider food in this context because as mentioned previously in the first chapter:

¹⁷ By “security levels” I am referring to the designation of prisons as minimum, medium, or maximum level facilities.

The symbolic relationship that humans have to food is intensified inside of prisons because consumption is a constantly recurring act and, within the context of a total institution, life is acts that are done on a consistent and repetitive basis (Godderis, 2006, p. 62).

Food is at the center of the carceral experience and an important mechanism with which to examine constructions of identity and community.

This thesis not only highlights the role food plays in carceral settings, but it also forces one to reflect on how their identity and sense of community is influenced by the foodways they engage with. Despite this thesis being rooted in carceral settings, there are universal takeaways around the symbolic nature of how one prepares, distributes, and consumes food. For example, one way that incarcerated people form community is through the reciprocal process of making “spreads.” Each person consuming the spread will typically contribute an ingredient to the cooking to produce a meal that is meant to be shared. This process promotes trust and encourages a feeling of community among those participating. In the outside world, one may participate in the occasional potluck or dinner with friends without thinking explicitly about the act of community that is being built in these interactions. Eating is a universal experience and even if one treats food as simply sustenance, this thesis can serve to help one reevaluate their relationship with food and its potential for active identity and community construction.

My research is also timely and made more important by the events of the last year — the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sweeping movement for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd. The COVID-19 pandemic has left people in prison more vulnerable than ever — the lack of safety precautions implemented behind bars has caused prisons to become a breeding ground for the virus, only made worse by the cut-off of support from the outside world due to a shutdown of visiting services and

lack of technology to connect with friends and family. In addition, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police sparked a nationwide movement to end police brutality. Intrinsic to that movement is the fight for a more just and equitable criminal justice system, one that does not disproportionately harm BIPOC and low-income communities. Now more than ever it is important to bring academic scholarship out of the confines of academia and into the mainstream discourse around pertinent issues such as racial justice and the system of mass incarceration in this country — my research contributes to that shift.

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