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Food Behind Bars: The Real Iron Chefs

Food plays an essential role in our lives. According to Jim Thomas, food sustains us, fills the voids in our day, symbolizes our status and identity, becomes a focal point for the organization of our life, functions as a social ritual in communing with others, and provides cultural signposts to negotiate and navigate through our social world (166). For people living in prison, food is able to take on an even stronger meaning. Seen as a limited resource, food symbolizes the power of the prison’s control and the inmates’ lack of choice and diminished sense of self; through food, prison can strip inmates of their sense of identity. Yet through in-cell cooking, food can also be used as a means of resisting social control, a way to adapt to life in prison while preserving one’s individuality, and a way to make every day seem a little less miserable.

By analyzing *The Convict Cookbook*, this paper will demonstrate that in-cell cooking – and, more importantly, sharing this ritual with others though the creation of a cookbook – can reestablish a sense of self, providing a form of rehabilitation for offenders. After a brief history of prison food in American society, the importance of food and mealtime ritual in prison will be discussed, including how prison is able to showcase its control over inmates and strip them of their identities through food. Then, through examination and analysis of *The Convict Cookbook*, in-cell cooking will be shown to offer convicts the ability to maintain a feeling of control over their lives, demonstrating to offenders that they have talents and skills which can be used after their release; more importantly, the creation of a cookbook can be a rehabilitating process, resulting with an end product that provides a feeling of pride, ownership, and control, and demonstrates to convicts that through their talents, they are able to be contributing members of society.

While it is clear throughout American prison history that prisons must provide food for its prisoners, the standards for the food served have remained ambiguous. Throughout the 19th century, for
example, prisoners ate only bread and water until they earned the right for “luxuries” such as meat and cheese (Bosworth & Thomas, 330). As society began to recognize the importance of nutritional values in the 20th century, two positions began to emerge in prison discourse. Most prisons recognized that healthy prisoners have the ability to become productive workers and, ultimately, reformed citizens; yet other prisons, including Alcatraz, viewed a high intake of calories and minimal exercise to be an essential tactic to make prisoners more lethargic and less likely to engage in violent behavior; thus, they set the daily diet for prisoners to 5,000 calories (Bosworth & Thomas, 330).

In recent decades, the importance of nutrition has set the stage for prison provisions. In the 1970s, the United States Supreme Court ruled that prisoners have the right to an adequate diet that is nutritious, meets “reasonable standards,” and is consistent with their religion as long as the diet is reasonable and doesn’t undermine the security goals of the facility (Thomas, 167-168). However, due to the ambiguity of the phrase “reasonable standards,” prison systems tend to vary dramatically on the quality of preparation and ingredients. Additionally, since contracting food services to privatized companies is becoming increasingly common, many state prisons are unable to meet federal standards (Bosworth & Thomas, 330). For example, the company Aramark, often hired by prison systems for their food services, has had numerous complaints lodged against them. One report stated inmate kitchen workers, on orders from an Aramark supervisor, soaked spoiled chicken in vinegar and water to take away the smell before cooking it; in another, inspectors found maggots on serving trays and kitchen floors (Tobin). While situations like these are not observed in every prison, it is important to recognize that for many, the standard set by the Supreme Court is not being used as it was intended.

Through food, the prison system is able to strip inmates of their sense of self and showcase their powerlessness. Mealtime remains a constant reminder of where a prisoner is, the meals he or she is missing with family members, and what the prisoner has lost overall – any sense of choice or control (Thomas, 170). Because food is a key element in defining our identity, the complete lack of all control
over what and when to eat is severely limiting, and can deprive inmates of all sense of self. For example, in a small personal essay on in-cell cooking, inmate Rick Webb writes, “There is a misconception held by the public as to the needs of prisoners. To the outside, it appears that all is provided for the needs of inmates of penal institutions. ‘Three hots and a cot’” (Washington State Penitentiary, 10). Despite Washington State Penitentiary’s varied menu, Webb states, food is a “cheap tranquilizer,” and such repetition numbs the taste buds and causes the death of appetite (Washington State Penitentiary, 10).

The entire mealtime ritual serves to disenfranchise the inmate population, stripping them of any sense of individual control and past identity. This can occur through both physical and psychological means. For example, although infrequent, mealtime violence is always a potential threat, which adds a certain level of stress to each mealtime. This tension is continually reaffirmed by large warning signs, such as ones posted in an Illinois maximum security prison dining hall which says, “LIE DOWN WHEN SHOTS ARE FIRED!” (Thomas, 169). Along with the threat of violence, sanitation and sabotage issues remain a constant, legitimate fear. In some prisons, sanitary standards in kitchens and dining areas are not rigidly enforced; on hot days in poorly-ventilated areas, the servers’ perspiration may drip into the food (Thomas, 169). Legitimate concerns also exist regarding food that is served outside the dining hall to inmates that have tightened security status or health issues; food served to these individuals often arrives at the wrong temperature, making it vulnerable to hygiene problems (Bosworth & Thomas, 332).

Even mealtime structure can cause psychological harm. Starting around 5 am and ending around 4 or 5 pm, mealtime provides an unfamiliar schedule for convicts, that completely removes any sensation of their past mealtime ritual (Bosworth & Thomas, 332; Fernandez). Upon entering the cafeteria, inmates typically are given 30 minutes from entry to exit to stand in line, receive their food, eat the food, and clean up (Bosworth & Thomas, 332). While this may seem like enough time, if lines into the dining room are slow, time for eating is reduced proportionately. Additionally, the presence of the serving line is a perpetual reminder of a prisoner’s vulnerability and powerlessness over their daily
routine (Bosworth & Thomas, 332). This ritual can seriously change the way inmates view mealtime, even when released. For example, one inmate explains, “A friend, who after being released from prison, went to McDonald’s with his wife and daughter for lunch. After finishing their meal, he noticed people moving towards them. His prison conditioning engaged, and he hurried his family away from the table thinking it was the guards coming to tell them to lock up” (Washington State Penitentiary, 97). In another testament an inmate states:

I kept calling my plate a ‘tray.’ All I had eaten on for years was a tray…when I was finished eating, I took my plate and silverware up to the reception area. I had been locked up for too many years, and I thought chow hall rules prevailed everywhere. The waitress looked at me and said, ‘Sir, we would have cleared you’re table for you. (143)

Although seemingly harmless, the rearrangement of one’s mealtime rituals and attitudes – whether through restructuring of mealtime practices or increased tension due to injury and health concerns – can potentially alienate prisoners from a sense of self.

The quality of the food itself is one of the main complaints by prisoners today. In most cases, food is extremely repetitive and monotonous, despite variations in the menus. In many prisons, convicts refer to the institutional meals as dog food, Kennel Rations, or Alpo – undoubtedly due to its uniformity and unpleasantness (Ross & Richards, 91). Due to poor preparation of the food, meals generally contain soggy vegetables and overcooked meat, making each meal indistinguishable from the next (Thomas, 169). According to Ross and Richards, one convict stated:

If the food looks better in the kosher line than the standard fare that is being offered that day, then suddenly a thousand convicts in the institution will appear to mysteriously converted to Judaism or Islam. Alternatively, if the special-diet food becomes disgusting, only the truly devout will stick to their religio-dietary principles. Regardless of which
meal line you join, usually the only food worth eating is the bread, cake or cookies prepared by convict bakers. (92)

To cut costs, many prisons attempt to improvise beyond serving merely repugnant food. For example, in Texas many prisons are now serving powdered milk and using sliced bread instead of hamburger and hotdog buns (Fernandez). Similarly, other prisons – such as those hiring Aramark – might note the use of certain ingredients to dilute the meals, or have policies specifically directed toward staff to serve a lower quantity of food to prisoners (Tobin). While these might seem to be relatively insignificant changes, the inability to provide prisoners with even a proper cheap meal clearly demonstrates the prison’s viewpoint regarding an inmate’s worth; not to mention the mere removal of the familiar can be detrimental to an inmate’s attitude.

Food can also be used as a form of punishment; in many prisons, especially those that are super-maximum secure facilities, “food loaf” is served to recalcitrant inmates. A food loaf includes all the ingredients of a regular dinner (i.e. hotdog, mashed potatoes, and beans) mashed together and baked like a meatloaf (Bosworth & Thomas, 331). A well-known and often used form of food loaf, known as the Nutraloaf, has been stirring up complaints and class action suits by prisoners. Nutraloaf is a mixture of cubed whole wheat bread, non-dairy cheese, raw carrots, spinach, seedless raisins, beans, vegetable oil, tomato paste, powdered milk and dehydrated potato flakes. Many prisoners, would rather go hungry than be forced to eat it; however, the Nutraloaf is not particularly bad tasting (Ring). Prisons pride themselves on having established a food that is essentially tasteless, and as one dining critic, upon testing the Nutraloaf, stated:

The mushy, disturbingly uniform innards recalled the thick, pulpy aftermath of something you dissected in biology class: so intrinsically disagreeable that my throat nearly closed up reflexively. But the funny thing about Nutraloaf is the taste. It’s not awful, nor is it especially good. I kept trying to detect any individual element—carrot? egg?—and
failing. Nutraloaf tastes blank, as though someone physically removed all hints of flavor.

[...]I ate two-thirds and gave up, longing for any hint of flavor, even a bad one. (Ruby)

Seth Lipschutz, attorney with Vermont's Prisoner's Rights office, says a diet of Nutraloaf is punishment, plain and simple (Ring). In essence, the blandness sends a message to prisoners that they are as worthless as the food they are served. Susan Fenner, executive director of the Texas Inmate Families Association, states, “One inmate told me, for some of them that’s all they have to look forward to is a meal” (Fernandez). To essentially remove what little remains of the food quality in prison, especially if it is the only part of an inmate’s day that the person has to look forward to, is a form of punishment and can completely disconnect an inmate from a sense of both familiarity and humanity.

Recently, some prisons have taken their control one step further. Since April 2011, prisons all over the state of Texas have stopped serving lunch over the weekends in order to cut costs. Over 23,000 inmates start their Saturdays and Sundays with a quick “brunch” between five and seven o’clock am, followed by dinner between four and six-thirty pm (Fernandez). According to the state prison agency, these meal reductions, coupled with their new policy ending the “last meal” ritual for death row inmates, should cut the budget by $2.8 million (Fernandez). Unfortunately, reducing food in order to cut costs is not something the Supreme Court addressed, and goes against the American Correctional Association’s three meals a day, seven days a week food recommendation (Fernandez). Issues such as this demonstrate how the power held by prisons can be detrimental to inmates, and how small changes that are considered for the good of society, such as cutting costs of food in order to afford increased security, can be damaging to those in prison.

To combat the authority held by prisons regarding mealtime ritual and food quality, prisoners developed in-cell cooking as a means of reinstituting some degree of control. Most prisons have some form of commissary where prisoners can purchase various items, including soups, packaged foods, snacks, candy, etc. These commissaries vary in price, availability and variety; for example, in one
commissary a package of beef ramen costs around 25 cents, while vanilla carnation instant breakfast drink costs roughly $4.30 (Williams). In order to pay for these items, inmates typically use the salaries garnered through their prison work. However, most salaries start at a mere $15/month and are often inefficient for covering all expenses, so many inmates rely on funds from their families (Bosworth & Thomas, 331).

While some prisoners merely purchase and eat the packaged foods straight from the commissary, others have developed a more meaningful system, using recipes passed down from other inmates, and inventing some of their own to create a type of “home cooked” meal. According to inmate Rick Webb:

Cell cooking gives us variety and spice, as well as the ability to exercise some independence and control over our lives. Besides being fun and fulfilling on a personal and physical level, in cell cooking allows us to be creative and share the results of our efforts with those around us. We can take pride in a job well done in a system and society that views us as bad guys. (Washington State Penitentiary, 10)

Most prisons allow convicts to perform some form of in-cell cooking. By embracing this method, inmates are able to resist any control the prison possesses over the meaning of food, and are able to thus create their own meaning. They are also able to avoid all pressures associated with mealtime, and instead possess the ability to cook and eat in leisure, both individually and socially. In-cell cooking also lends itself to helping inmates adjust to prison life, because it provides them with a routine that is familiar to life on the outside.

Nevertheless, as one might expect, cooking in a cell isn’t easy. While some prisoners in low-security prisons have access to microwaves, most convicts need to get creative. In The Convict Cookbook, the inmates detail exactly how they are able to cook food and how to keep it cool. According to the authors, “Medium Security prisoners…have hot water radiators with pipes that go from wall to wall. We can heat up foods after wrapping in plastic […] by laying them on the pipes” (23). In some
prisons, a hand-held device known as a “stinger” is a common method to heat water in the cells, although in some facilities they are considered contraband. To keep food cool, the authors use, “the outside ledge. We put soda bottles, meats, cheese, and sauces outside the windows during the cool months. In the summer, we resort to filling our laundry buckets with ice and keeping food items in them. Because it can get very hot in our cells, we can get ice at gate times” (23). Another obstacle to in-cell cooking is the means in which the food is prepared. The lack of utensils, dishes, and other cooking gear in prison cells make the cooking process more challenging. At the Washington State Penitentiary, the inmates have developed a way to create a makeshift bowl using a garbage bag supported by books. The authors ask:

No large bowl? Then take a couple large trash bags, double them up, then take four stacks of books about one foot high each, put them on a table and make a hollow space in the middle. Put the trash bags in the middle of the hollow space to line the space. Roll up the excess part of the bags, and presto you’ve got a bowl. (77)

Since storage space is limited in the cells, inmates need to be particularly creative when it comes to organizing their ingredients. Authors of The Convict Cookbook tell readers how they create a cupboard out of cardboard boxes, and provide instructions for the reader (95). By using their creativity and determination, inmates are able to find a way to engage in in-cell cooking despite the obstacles facing them. They can take control over the situation and apply their problem-solving skills to each scenario – thus regaining some independence in a system designed to remove it.

For many prisons, in-cell cooking is a relatively common occurrence, and can provide prisoners with a sense of control over their lives, as well as satisfaction that they are able to partake in a ritual that reminds them of who they are – and who they can be – outside of prison. Aside from the possibility that an inmate might find he really enjoys cooking, in-cell cooking provides inmates with a variety of skills that can help them in prison and once released. For example, in an excerpt from The Convict Cookbook,
an unidentified inmate says, “I’ve heard it said that…proper preparation prevents poor performance. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail” (69). In-cell cooking can teach inmates the need to prepare – such as what ingredients to get for a certain dish, how to go about cooking that dish, etc. This skill can be employed upon release and may help keep them from returning to prison. In-cell cooking also provides inmates the importance of giving, lending, and borrowing. For example, when discussing in-cell cooking Webb feels it is important to include a statement regarding the importance of giving. He states, “Giving is a fundamental way to achieve meaning in one’s life. We, as prisoners, are prohibited by code and policy from giving material items to one another […] In spite of the rules, we choose to give anyways” (141). By learning the importance in giving, sharing, and borrowing, inmates can come to understand these three principles, which are essential to a healthy life outside of prison.

Documenting these in-cell cooking experiences and recipes in the form of a cookbook can actually become a rehabilitative process for offenders. It provides a way for convicts to share their stories and experiences with readers and the other authors; whether they are discussing life experiences inside or outside of prison, this idea of a shared understanding can be similar to a form of group therapy. Additionally, the creativity required to create a cookbook demonstrates to convicts that they possess talents which can be shared with others, and reminds them that they are – and will be, upon release – able to be contributing members of society. In 2004, the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla, Washington, provided an opportunity for convicts to create a cookbook for charity. This cookbook was the result of a class created to help ease the transition of inmates from prison to society, and to demonstrate that they possess qualities and creativity that can contribute to their communities. Filled with pictures, recipes, hand-drawn cartoons, informational blurbs, “prison thoughts,” and a glossary of prison slang, it becomes clear to the reader that the authors put time and effort into creating the cookbook; further demonstrated in the introduction where the authors add, “All these men spent
numerous hours collecting, writing, cooking, and taste testing recipes” (Washington State Penitentiary, 1).

One of the most prominent features of *The Convict Cookbook* is the sharing of experiences, which is significant in offenders’ transitions back into society. Upon creating a cookbook, inmates are able to share their personal experiences with others, whether inside or outside of prison. For example, many prisoners share their life histories within the recipes themselves. Some convicts apply their ethnic background to the foods they create; for instance, Chavez prefers Mexican-American dishes, such as the “Upside Down Huevos Rancheros,” and Speedy and Uknow prefer more Southern dishes, such as the “Po Mans Burritos.” Others include at-home recipes provided to them by various family members. By incorporating these recipes into the cookbook the inmates continue to share personal parts of their life with others, and perhaps gain a sense of worthwhile contribution by revealing a part of their own lives with society.

Inmates also contribute their personal experiences and opinions regarding life in prison itself, exposing the two worlds they live in and discussing what it’s like to be considered inside society, yet outside of society. They are able to disclose how they view the system they live in while recording recipes and how certain ideas and issues retain a special meaning. For example, in one prison pondering, convict Torrey Baker says:

> The penal system has many ups and downs. The deciding factor lies solely in the individual’s ability to adapt outside of these walls. Those of us who are incarcerated would have a better chance at becoming productive members of society if there were more available resources for ex-cons, any of who have little or no job skills. (105)

Baker expresses his distress in a system that reinforces a cycle of incarceration for those individuals who lack the resources necessary to succeed in society. In another prison pondering, inmate Bryce Lavery expresses a similar concern. However, his is phrased in a more positive, optimistic manner. He says:
Everybody who has ever been locked up knows what it is like to encounter pessimists. When you talk about your dreams and you are working on achieving your goals, there are those people who will try to discourage you if it does not fit into their paradigm of what they think you should be or do […] It is important that we have realistic, obtainable goals and believe in ourselves. Do not be discouraged with negativity of others and the challenges of life. Positive change is possible. Believe in yourself. (35)

By including these thoughts in the cookbook, the authors receive a feeling of significance and resolution; but more importantly, it provides them with an arena to share their experiences. Prisoners also use the recipes themselves to share their in-prison experiences. For example, in *The Convict Cookbook*, one convict in particular enjoys weaving his recipes with personal narrative regarding life incarcerated. In the recipe for “Mexican Meatball Soup (Albondigas),” Henry Chavez discusses the change in accessibility to the black market for prison food:

> Ranked as the tastiest of prison made Mexican dishes, Albondigas (Meatball Soup) and Chicken Soup no longer filled…hallways with its aroma on weekends. Instead key players [in the black market] one after another were nabbed and joined the ranks of the non-programming/unemployed, as their more astute colleagues grew tails. (61)

Using the recipe Chavez comments on the end to the black market due to some prison workers “ratting out” those that were providing the supplies, and expresses his opinions on what happened. Chavez employs this method in most of his recipes, giving him an outlet for his thoughts on prison. Chavez also discusses his experiences cooking food for himself while working as a prison chef, which is a banned practice. He writes, “My ‘lookout’ man would lick his chops as he watched me prepare these gourmet burgers […] I would pull them out of the oven and people from all over the kitchen would appear like hogs on corn.” (46). Chavez describes his experiences in attempting to regain control and respect by cooking for himself, as well as the responses of others around him as he shared his creations. By sharing
these experiences through humorous narrative, Chavez expresses himself in a forum that makes his thoughts and opinions appear both worthwhile and noteworthy, which is a rewarding experience that validates his sense of individuality and self-worth.

Creativity is an important element of rehabilitation through cookbooks, because creating a book is itself a creative process. Convicts must think about how they want to put the book together, where they will get recipes, and the layout—whether or not to include pictures, cartoons, or other artwork. Then, they must piece the cookbook together by drawing cartoons, taking pictures, and testing recipes. The entire process is a group effort, which could be considered a form of group therapy. Finally, as they create the end product and are able to see their own handiwork, they can feel a sense of pride over the product they created, and their sense of self-worth is reaffirmed.

The most evident presence of creativity in the cookbook is within the recipes themselves. For example, “Double D’s Jailhouse Pizza,” a hit among the convicts, is created with ramen noodles, chili garlic sauce, cheese spread, pepperoni stick, and Doritos (55). “Torrey’s Tamales” are made from Fritos, Doritos, Ramen, instant rice, dehydrated beans, and summer sausage (54). These recipes showcase the convicts’ abilities to be creative – given the limited amount of ingredients, the breadth to which these inmates have gone to create such recipes is noteworthy. Similarly, certain recipe names are creative; “Prizzon Po Carcass Casserole,” “Behind These Bars,” “Jail Mix,” “Short-timer Cheesecake,” and “Convict Mocha,” have names which have clearly resonate with the inmates. Some recipes even have a backstory; for example, the “Dope Fiend Sandwich” was named as such because heroin addicts typically come to prison craving sweets such as these round cookies (117).

The authors also used their creative side in order to have fun with the reader. Three recipes in the cookbook are written by the “Yard Monster,” “Mrs. Yard Monster,” and “Baby Yard Monster.” Upon seeing these names, the reader is compelled to flip to the slang section, to discover what a “yard monster” is and finds that it is a fictitious being which stops people from going to the yard; people claim
“My cell mate is afraid of the yard monster, that’s why he doesn’t go to the yard” (163). By incorporating quick slang references such as the yard monster, the inmates are able to teach readers some of the terms they use as “prison lingo.” However, this is more than just a silly addition. By doing this, the authors are creatively incorporating “their” world with “our” world – giving the readers a taste of the prison life in an innovative and entertaining manner.

On first impression, one of the most creative elements the reader identifies is the cartoons. Located throughout the cookbook, John Bucko’s cartoons exhibit real artistic value, and seeing them in print and sharing them with others demonstrates to Bucko that his talent is valued. In an article about *The Convict Cookbook*, the reporter states, “the cartoonist, a former cocaine addict, said that seeing his drawing on the cover was far better than any high he had ever had” (Evelyn). Yet the cartoons do much more than provide a cute picture. In most of them, Bucko incorporates a critique either of the prison system, life in prison, other inmates, or in-cell cooking. For example, in one cartoon, Bucko drew two penguins sitting on an isolated iceberg. One penguin is holding a fish, says to the other, “For just ONCE I’d like to eat something different!” (27). Clearly, Bucko is making a reference to prison food. The penguins, isolated on the iceberg, represent the inmates insulated in prison. The food, which is the fish, has become a repeated pattern that feels tiring and overused. Through the cartoon, Bucko is making a comment that the inmates are weary of having the same meals over and over, and would prefer a change. Bucko creates a similar reference in a cartoon depicting an inmate in the chow hall. The prisoner sits at a table, fork in hand, with a plate of unknown goop in front of him. He thinks, “Oh boy, pineapple-upside-down-beans!… AGAIN!!”(79). Once again, using the phrase “again,” Bucko is referencing the repetitiveness of the food. He is also making a critique on the presentation of the food served. Using a play-on-words with the idea of pineapple-upside-down cake, Bucko exchanges the word cake for beans, implying that the food served is nontraditional and not particularly satisfying.
Almost every convict in *The Convict Cookbook* shares with the reader his experience in prison. Whether through Chavez’s personal stories, “Prison Ponderings,” Bucko’s cartoons, each prisoner is able to communicate what he is going through and what life is like “on the inside.” By doing this, the authors are able to express themselves in a way they normally cannot, which in essence, provides a means of rehabilitation. By providing a space for convicts to share their experiences in a creative manner, this cookbook granted them the means to restore – or even reinvent– their own individual identities; recovering a sense of control, independence, and self.

This paper’s exploration into in-cell cooking is a beginning inquiry into a topic lacking analysis. Due to the lack of research regarding in-cell cooking, as well as the limited amount of cookbooks authored by inmates, there is much more to explore regarding this subject; for example, an analysis of gender differences in prison cooking. From this initial inquiry it is evident that in-cell cooking, especially when coupled with creating a cookbook or memoir of some kind, can be cathartic for inmates. Because food plays such an important role in our lives, prisons easily remove one’s sense of independence and individuality by imposing strict regulations on food and mealtime rituals. By engaging in in-cell cooking, prisoners are able to resist the complete powerlessness urged by the prison system, and reestablish some control over their lives. However, after examining *The Convict Cookbook*, the process of cookbook creation, especially with regards to in-cell recipes, can be a rehabilitating process leading to an end result of which inmates can be proud.
References


