



# PRISON

# CONFIDEN



# NTIAL

Faced with soaring populations and shrinking budgets, the prison industrial complex is finding it challenging to feed inmates healthy, satisfying meals. Author **Mark Hawthorne** uncovers the steps prisons are taking to improve what they are dishing out—and how prisoners are digesting it.

## Prison chow has long gotten a bad rap—right up there with hospital meals and airplane food.

Like these other institutions, prison kitchens are in the volume business, and the sweet spot lies somewhere between a balanced diet and a balanced budget. Often, a prison's focus on cost-cutting leads to unpalatable meals and unsatisfied appetites. In some, the food is considered so inedible or devoid of nutrition that inmates who once used cigarettes as currency for favors now use ramen noodle packs, which are traded to fellow prisoners hungry for decent sustenance. And for any number of reasons—misinformed dietitians, officials refusing to give a prisoner special treatment, or simply the cost of making non-standard meals—the dietary requirements of inmates who want to eat vegan, or at least healthier, are routinely ignored, leaving it up to them to get creative or go without.

Prison cuisine is already limited, yet in an era of dwindling budgets, food services are often the first to be downsized or turned over to private companies. The result can be a reduction in the quality or quantity of food served. In some Texas and Tennessee prisons, for example, inmates are given just two meals a day on weekends—breakfast and dinner—meals that are high in carbs and low in vegetables and protein, leaving many prisoners hungry for more.

Most prisons today, however, recognize that offering satisfying meals that taste good and, when applicable, allow prisoners to eat their ethics, is one way to keep the peace. But it wasn't always so.

### Gruel and unusual

In Victorian England—the era of poorhouses and pea-soupers, where daily rations for convicts commonly consisted of bread and oatmeal gruel—prison administrators argued that inmates were criminals and should be given just enough nourishment to keep them breathing, and for as cheaply as possible. But there was

disagreement about the role of prisons—whether inmates were there to be punished for their misdeeds or instead molded into productive members of society—and such debate consequently affected the food provided.

These were the days when vegetarian meals were recognized as the most cost-effective, so European prisons regularly served porridge, bread, potatoes, beans, vegetable soup, and even beer. This was clearly alluring in famine-plagued Ireland, where prison authorities in the mid-1800s were convinced the nation's more destitute citizens were breaking laws just to get fed. To discourage these hungry miscreants, they reduced the amount of food doled out to male prisoners each day. While this did not deter crime, it was approved by a medical officer and was considered more economical.

Across the pond, prison food in the

Federal Bureau of Prisons), state prisons (administered by each state), and county jails (where individuals await trial or serve sentences up to one year)—options can vary widely from facility to facility. Most institutions rotate their menus, serving the same foods on a regular cycle. Others plan meals around whatever ingredients they can snap up at the lowest price.

### Hungry for justice

Keeping costs low means some prisons spend as little as 56¢ per meal. Half a dollar doesn't buy much, and the resulting options—such as bologna sandwiches, watery oatmeal, and reconstituted mashed potatoes—can be predictably meager. Last July, prisoners in the Butler County jail in Kansas were so disgusted by their mashed potatoes that they rioted in protest. Once the violence was quelled, jail officials decided it was the chow-hall security that

eating toothpaste and lotion to help fill his stomach. The lawsuit contended that prisoners were fed only about 1,700 calories a day, leading another prisoner at the jail to drop 90 pounds in six months.

The privatization of prison food can be traced to a 1927 Alabama law, which gave county sheriffs in the state \$1.75 per prisoner to cover the daily cost of their meals. Most Alabama counties operate under this system today, with the same \$1.75-a-day allocation, and the law allows sheriffs to keep any excess funds, resulting in massive corruption. In 2009, for instance, Alabama Sheriff Greg Bartlett was arrested after putting about \$212,000 from his Morgan County jail food budget into his personal bank account over three years, while the inmates received nutritionally inadequate meals. And Bartlett's jail is but one example of how bad the food is in Alabama lockups. "Most

Inherently, the prison industrial experience involves very few choices—certainly around what inmates can eat. But the choices around food in federal prison marginally improved last October when all 102 US federal prisons began offering a vegan entrée for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

United States was a means of reward and punishment. In the 19th century, incoming prisoners had to survive on bread and water until they'd served a certain amount of time, at which point meat and cheese were added to their diets. Decades later, with the culinary revolution that emerged alongside the growing knowledge about human nutrition, prison meals were generally regarded more for their calorie content than as a way to control. "Healthy prisoners, it was believed, would be productive workers and, ultimately, reformed citizens," writes criminologist Mary Bosworth in *Encyclopedia of Prisons and Correctional Facilities*. "Even so, some institutions, such as Alcatraz, deliberately offered a daily total of at least 5,000 calories, combined with minimal exercise, to make prisoners more lethargic and less likely to engage in violent behavior."

These days, US prisons are mandated to offer inmates about 2,200 calories a day. Because the food is provided by an outside contractor or the institution itself—which includes federal prisons (run by the

needed improvement, not the food.

To help cope with shrinking prison-food budgets, more jurisdictions are turning to private companies such as Aramark and Trinity Services Group, both of which have been the subject of countless complaints from prisoners about the food they are serving—grievances that continue to be ignored. "They don't have a choice," says Jim O'Connell, a Trinity spokesperson. "We could have a bigger discussion of why they're there to begin with. But you're served what you're served."

When complaints go unheeded, prisoners and their advocates often take matters from the jailhouse to the courthouse. Recent lawsuits have revealed that while privatized menu plans may meet nutritional guidelines on paper, the actual portions served are inadequate to sustain healthy bodies. This means higher profits for companies—and dramatic weight loss for inmates. One former prisoner who sued a New York Montgomery County jail in 2014 said he lost 24 pounds in five months at the facility,

of it is like powdered food, and the portions are minimal in county jails," says Pastor Kenneth Glasgow, who works in prisoner outreach in the state.

The privatized food-service model has become something of a hot potato. In 2015, the Michigan Department of Corrections fired Aramark as its food-service contractor after finding that food had come into contact with rodents and maggots. The contract has since been passed onto Trinity Services Group, which is facing claims that the food it's serving is rotten, too dry to eat, and in portions that are smaller than ever. Making matters worse, Trinity reportedly hired many of the employees Aramark let go when it lost its contract. "The only thing they did was switch the employees' shirts," Lamont Heard, a prisoner in Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility, told the *Detroit Metro Times*. "It's the same people. They just switched the title, but the food is worse. Everything is worse than with Aramark."

Jails and prisons not using private contractors must still deal with budget

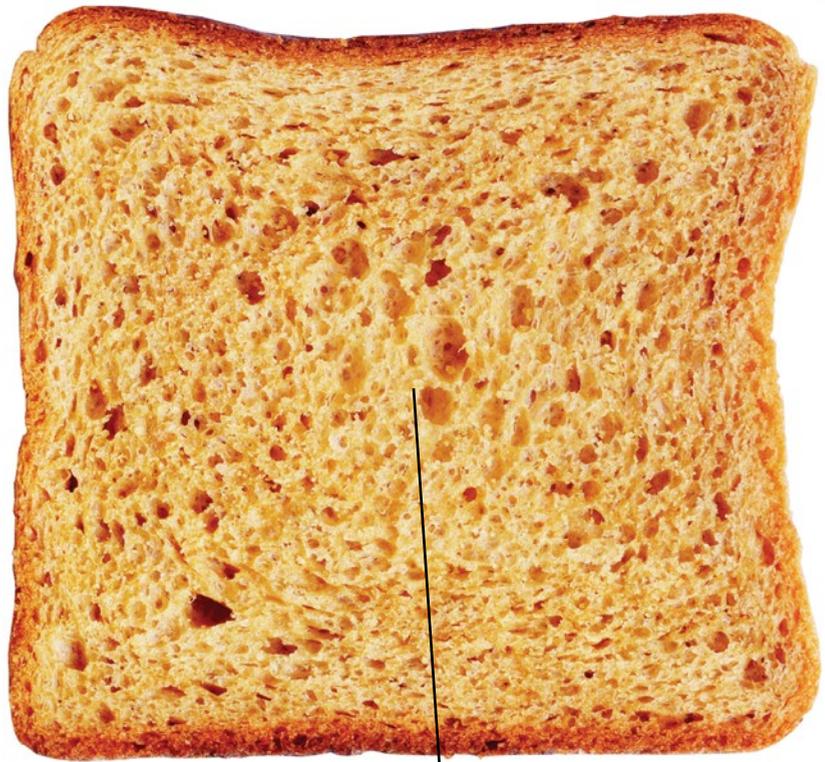
constraints, of course. Tim Thielman, who oversees food services for the Ramsey County Correctional Facility in St. Paul, MN, says he buys fruit and vegetables according to season, which helps reduce cost. "For example, a watermelon costs me about \$15 in the winter, versus \$4 in the summer."

Prison food quality is often not only diminished by thin budgets, but a lack of flavor. "A large majority of the population in my facility have health problems, and we need to cook without salt and spicy ingredients," says Thielman, who is also president of the Association of Correctional Food Service Affiliates. "I also do not buy or grow any spice that could be used to assault staff or other inmates, such as hot peppers or crushed red peppers."

### Carrot and stick

Inherently, the prison industrial experience involves very few choices—certainly around what inmates can eat. But the choices around food in federal prison marginally improved last October when all 102 US federal prisons began offering a vegan entrée for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. According to Bureau of Prisons spokesperson Justin Long, the national menu is reviewed at least once a year to assess operational impact, cost, nutritional content, and inmate eating preferences. In 2016, enough demand was recorded that a vegan alternative was introduced. "The Bureau seeks to provide a variety of options, including vegan options, which also support religious dietary accommodations," says Long.

Though the majority of county jails and state prisons don't offer vegan meals, there are some exceptions—most notably Florida's Department of Corrections, which has served vegan meals statewide since the mid-1990s. In the late-1990s, the Victor Valley Medium Community Correctional Facility in Adelanto, CA hosted what some considered an outlandish new program. Officials there separated the prison into two sections and allowed inmates to choose which side they wanted to live in. On one side, they would be served standard institutional fare; on the other, they would receive vegan food and be required to participate in anger management classes, job training, and bible studies. To the surprise of many,



including prison officials, 85 percent of inmates chose to go vegan.

Some prisoners come to veganism the hard way. Former inmate Intelligent Allah, imprisoned for nearly 19 years in New York, says going vegan while incarcerated was a natural extension of the compassion he felt toward the man he had killed. "A lot of guys in prison lack control—they're caught up in what they think manhood should be," he says. "I took a guy's life in a street fight. Empathy soon became a theme in my life. Empathy for the guy first, then compassion for animals."

Allah sometimes found maintaining his compassionate diet behind bars a challenge—a common complaint from vegan inmates. But prisoners are rarely able to sue correctional institutions for not honoring their ethics, says Alex Friedmann, associate director of Human Rights Defense Center, a nonprofit advocating for prisoner rights. "Legal recourse is only available if prison food rises to the level of a constitutional violation, which could occur if, for example, it is basically inedible, if food poisoning or a death due to food allergies results, or if corrections officials fail to provide religious diets required pursuant to a prisoner's faith—such as kosher or halal meals." The religious

### ON THE MENU

All US federal prisons now offer inmates a vegan entrée option at each meal.

#### Vegan breakfast

Fresh fruit  
Hot oatmeal  
Whole wheat bread  
Jam

provision can sometimes be extended to veganism, however. In 2015, prisoner George Hall won his lawsuit against the Michigan Department of Corrections after he argued that his Messianic Jewish faith restricted his diet to foods that contained no animal products whatsoever.

### Jailhouse wok

For the more than 2 million men, women, and juveniles incarcerated inside one of the more than 5,000 jails, prisons, and correctional facilities in the United States, food can be a grim reminder of their imprisonment, or it can be a source of pleasure. "Bad food is definitely a painful reminder, and most of the food is bad," says Jan Smitowicz, who managed to remain vegan during his two years in various Illinois prisons, often by making

## JAIL JARGON

Here is an A-to-Z of food-related prison slang.

**aggie** \a-gē\  
Garden hoe

**bean slot** \bēn slāt\  
The opening in the cell door where food is delivered

**choke sandwich**  
\chōk san(d)-wich\  
A peanut butter sandwich with no jelly

**chow** \chaŭ\  
Institutional meal

**commissary** \kā-mə-ser-ē\  
Prison-operated store where food, hygiene products, and clothing are sold

**hot pot** \hät pät\  
Device sold in the commissary used to heat water to a low temperature

**mud** \mäd\  
Coffee

**pruno** \prünō\  
Homemade alcohol made from fruit, bread, and anything with sugar—also called hooch

**spread** \spred\  
Gourmet prison meal, often used to describe big potlucks put together by a group of inmates

**stinger** \stinj-ər\  
Contraband heating element made from metal, designed to boil water

**zoom zooms** \züm zümz\  
Snack cakes and cookies

his own meals.

Like Smitowicz, inmates who can afford to, buy food supplies from the prison commissary—or otherwise obtain foodstuffs from the kitchen or other inmates via the prisoner-run black market. They routinely skip the chow line and prepare meals in their cells. This requires ingenuity and resourcefulness, especially when an inmate has no access to a microwave or cooking utensils.

One of the hacks Daniel Genis learned in his 10 years behind bars was how to create a contraband “stinger”—a heating device made from a power cord and nail clippers. “Separate the two sides of the nail clippers, attach each side to the positive and negative wires of the power cord, plug the cord into an electrical outlet, and drop the clipper sides into a cup filled with the cold running water available in each cell,” he explains. “Salt the water, and then drop some uncooked ramen noodles into the now vigorously boiling water.” Genis even turned a hot pot and tin can into a wok for stir-frying.

Preparing meals this way might seem primitive, but it can go a long way toward building inmate camaraderie, says Smitowicz. “Food brings people together, probably even more so in prison. For special occasions—like, say, the Super Bowl—I’d see six, eight, 10 guys go in together on a giant, special meal that took hours to prepare and cost probably \$50 to \$80 per guy, with each acquiring one or two items from the commissary the week before, planning it all out in complex detail.”

Most prison meals, however, are eaten in the chow hall, where inmates are served standard fare. Hamburgers, potato salad, and meatloaf are popular options with prison officials, since these are inexpensive foods.

In California state prisons, inmates are given a hot breakfast, a sack lunch, and

a hot dinner, says Laurie Maurino, RD, departmental food administrator for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. But they do have other choices. “Currently, we offer a vegetarian diet [option],” she says, “so they can get an alternative to meat items on the menu, such as peanut butter. At night, we can take off the meat entrée and give them an extra scoop of beans or some other item that’s got some protein in it.” The state’s general-population menus have about 100 grams of protein in them, says Maurino, which is twice as much as they need. “The rest of our menu items are vegetarian-compliant ... the only things with animal ingredients are the meat items.” The budget for this is \$3.45 per day per inmate—for all three meals.

### Savoring solutions

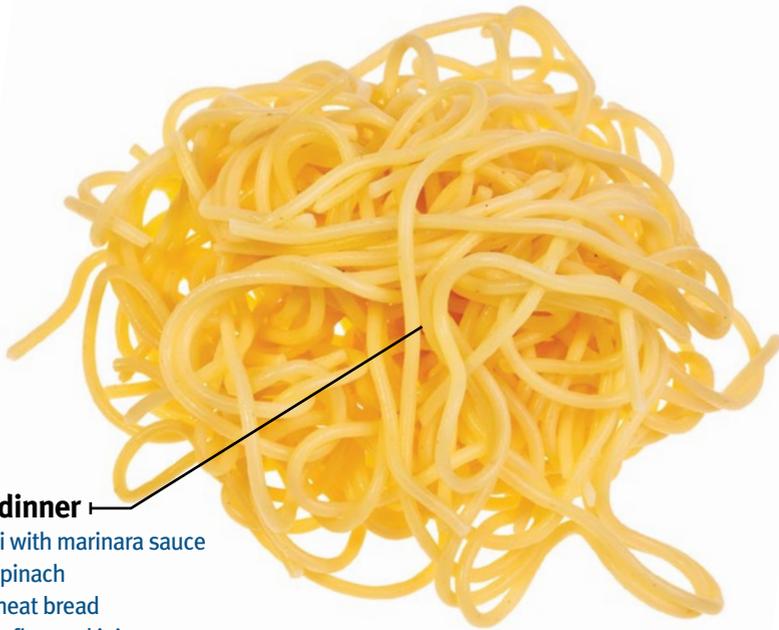
With food contributing so much to an inmate’s mental and physical wellbeing, many agree that the system that feeds them needs reform. Budgets may be tight, but serving meals that are unappetizing or nutritionally insufficient comes painfully close to cruel and unusual punishment.

Of course, it must also be questioned why there are so many prisoners to feed in the first place. While violent crime has been declining in the US, prison populations have tripled since 1980. The ugly reality is that prisons have become an industry, with inmates as the commodity. Not only are prisoners a source of involuntary labor—used to make everything from license plates to clothing, and forced to work in

### Vegan lunch

Soy chicken patty  
Pinto beans  
Lettuce and tomato salad  
Choice of dessert or fresh fruit  
Artificially flavored juice or water





### Vegan dinner

Spaghetti with marinara sauce  
Canned spinach  
Whole wheat bread  
Artificially flavored juice or water

dairies and slaughterhouses—but their very presence behind bars represents enormous profits for privately run prisons and the food, healthcare, and security companies that service them. The mass incarceration of young men and women—mostly people of color—for petty offenses keeps the prison industrial complex viable. Addressing the nutritional needs of these burgeoning populations is a growing challenge.

According to Friedmann, a former prisoner himself, what we need is a new way of thinking. “First, corrections officials need to recognize that prisoners are people who deserve to be treated with the minimum dignity and respect afforded to those who are not incarcerated,” he says. “The notion that prisoners do not deserve nutritious and palatable meals—or at least food that is not spoiled, past its expiration date, or marked ‘not for human consumption’—must be rejected. That would require lawmakers and policymakers to ensure prison and jail food budgets are adequately funded.” It’s not that prisoners are asking for, or should receive, gourmet meals, he says. “Rather, they should at least be served food comparable to that served in public schools.”

As it happens, more of these schools are offering vegan options in their cafeterias, a model that prisons and jails would do well to emulate. For prisoners like Intelligent Allah who reject violence,

a properly balanced vegan diet is more than just nutritious and satisfying—it also fosters a respect for all life. In the case of the Victor Valley Medium Community Correctional Facility, the results of their vegan program were astounding—the divisions among various racial groups typically seen in prison were reportedly non-existent on the vegan side. Moreover, while California’s recidivism rate at the time was 95 percent, during the seven years of the vegan program, the Victor Valley facility had a recidivism rate of less than 2 percent. “What we eat not only affects us physically, but it affects our mental attitude, our aggressiveness, and our ability to make good decisions,” explains Julianne Aranda, the nutrition services coordinator of the prison.

With prison officials trying to squeeze every cent from their food budgets, converting to an all-vegan menu makes more sense than ever. Buying plant-based ingredients in massive quantities will go a long way to reduce expenses and ensure that everyone’s dietary needs are met, regardless of an inmate’s religious or ethical preferences. And, who knows? If prisons take the lead, perhaps hospitals and airlines won’t be far behind. [VN](#)

**Mark Hawthorne’s** latest book is *A Vegan Ethic: Embracing a Life of Compassion Toward All*.

## VEGANISM, RELIGION, & RIGHTS

For some inmates, vegan meals are legally guaranteed, and can even be fought for.

To maintain a vegan diet in prison, many inmates are forced to supplement their meals with overpriced foods from the commissary. This is both expensive and, for some inmates, a violation of their rights, says David Fathi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union National Prison Project. “Prisons have a default menu for everyone, and there are two ways to get an exception,” he explains. “The first is for medical reasons; a prisoner must be provided a diet consistent with her medical needs. The second is religious,” he continues. “Under the First Amendment, prisoners are to be given meals in line with their religion.”

If a prisoner has a religious obligation to abstain from eating animals (if they are Jainists or Mahayana Buddhists, for example), then the prison is required to accommodate them. In 2000, Congress underscored this by passing the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, which prohibits states from imposing substantial burdens on the religious exercise of prisoners—including denying them vegan meals, if this is one way the inmate’s religion is practiced. “Do prisons always comply?” Fathi questions. “No. But then an inmate can file a lawsuit.”