

# FIXED MENU

Eating with the inmates of  
Westville Correctional Facility

by KEVIN PANG

**I type this sentence twenty minutes** after eating leftover spaghetti and clams for breakfast, a Hungry Man-sized portion at nine a.m. It is an exertion of my free will to do so. It is within my civic right as a dedicated grocery shopper and keeper of leftovers, imprinted in the Charter of Man, that I am free to eat however much I want, of what I want, when I want.

In prison, that right is stripped away. Craving pizza on a Saturday night? Feel like washing it down with cold beer? It's not happening. Your right is reduced to eating portion-fixed food dictated by a warden on a set schedule. If you're hungry after dinner, you'll go to bed hungry.

The thought of losing this control sends me into a panic attack.

**T**he town of Westville sits beneath the southern curve of Lake Michigan, an hour's drive from Chicago, past the belching steel plants of Northwest Indiana. It is every small American town that ever existed, a patchwork of green and brown rectangles on Google Map's satellite view. On the two January days I visited Westville Correctional Facility, the winter's second polar vortex was bearing down on Middle America, plunging daytime wind chills to -25 degrees Fahrenheit. Westville's position south of Lake Michigan also makes the area prone to biblical lake-effect snowstorms. And so, against the howling white-out squall, the eighty-five-acre prison—occupying about

one-eighth of Westville—appeared utterly *gulag*-ish.

The first thing you notice when walking into Westville, however, is that the staff is unflinchingly Midwestern. Their jocular disposition—beginning with your pat-down officer at the security checkpoint—is unnervingly pleasant. I remember a coroner I met years ago who had the most inappropriately morbid sense of humor—he mimed the suicide victim on the gurney blowing his brains out, complete with exploding hand gestures from his temple. It was, I realized, a coping mechanism to deal with the darkness he sees daily, one that might explain why the prison staff (at least in the presence of a reporter) seemed so sunny.

To enter the prison compound proper, you step through a mechanized door into a holding cell, and wait as that door closes before a second door slowly grinds its metallic gears open. When that second door clangs shut with a sound just like in the movies, you enter a world of around 3,300 inmates, each serving an average of four years for offenses from burglary and drug possession to arson and worse.

Their favorite pastime seems to be staring at you. An Asian reporter and Hispanic photographer are curious when every day's the same day: wake up at five a.m., don your beige prison garb, work your twenty-cents-an-hour job, sit around in the dorms until lights out at eleven p.m. So the inmates are eager to talk, if just to break up the monotony. And when you mention you're here to write about food in prisons, it's like ramming a car into a fire hydrant and watching the water gush skyward.

"Why don't you grab one and eat with us, bro? And you tell us what you think," says Shaun Kimbrough, who's wheelchair-bound and serving a five-year sentence for aggravated battery. "It's gonna hurt your stomach, but we're used to it."

The Westville cafeteria, or "chow hall," is where the state of Indiana spends \$1.239 to feed each prisoner each meal, three times a day. They line up single file, shuffling forward until they reach a waist-height hole in the wall. Every five seconds, a hardened plastic tray of compartmentalized food slides into view and is quickly picked up. The transaction between server and inmate is an anonymous relationship, a food glory hole.

Today is fish sandwich day at Westville, and conspiracy theories abound.

"They know y'all coming, that's why they served fish," Kimbrough

says. Apparently fish is one of the better-tasting offerings the prisoners see, in the way that canker sores are the best kind of ulcers. "That's a top-notch tray right there. But that fish patty, it ain't meat. It's just breading."

The fish patty sits atop three slices of white bread—two to make a sandwich, and the extra slice presumably to meet the 2,500 to 2,800 daily calories as recommended by the American Correctional Association for adult males under fifty. There's also a corn muffin, steamed carrots and green beans, plus mac and cheese sloshing around in a puddle of bright orange water. Some trays hold elbow pasta, others have corkscrew. Beverage is a Styrofoam cup of powdered tropical punch.

The most coveted items on the tray are the salt and pepper packets. Every person I surveyed, without fail, used the word "bland" in describing chow hall food. Rather than prepare separate trays for inmates with high cholesterol or blood pressure, the kitchen serves low-sodium meals for the entire prison population. Even with the added salt, though, it tastes like a vague notion of lunch, with all the flavor and pleasure of food eaten one hour after dental surgery.

Says Thomas Powell, who's serving time for drug dealing: "You're salting something with no flavor to begin with. It's tasteless. It's horrible. It's repetitive day after day." Powell brings packets of powdered ramen soup seasoning to sprinkle over his food. He is not alone in his desire for flavor—up and down the rows of steel tabletops, inmates pull out bottles of hot sauce they bring from the dorms, dousing their breaded fish and three slices of white bread.

The next most frequently utilized food descriptor is "mush." Food texture is difficult to retain when

most meals are prepared several days before service—cooked, then quickly refrigerated in an industry-standard practice called blast-chilling. Reheating it, workers in the production kitchen claim, turns everything into a one-note texture more suitable for nursing homes.

Two entrées exemplify mush: goulash and chop suey.

On days these dishes are served, many inmates will skip their meals altogether. Hearing them describe the dishes is like listening to grandpa recall war atrocities he witnessed: spoken with a heavy sigh, best left in the past.

On goulash: "Noodles in red sauce ... his tray may have meat, mine may not ... the noodles have been overcooked so much, it's compacted together so it's like mush. You try to pick up one noodle and eighteen go along for the ride."

Two inmates have a conversation explaining chop suey:

"It's a bunch of cabbage and water."

"That's it. It may have a few grains of rice."

"... And corn if you're lucky."

"See, in mine, I don't remember corn."

An inmate named James Rogers speaks more broadly about dining in incarceration: "I've been here for six years. It has never changed. You came here on a good day. If you came out when they served the other stuff, you'd be horrified. We have no choice but to eat it."

I ask Warren Christian, in Westville the last five years for robbery, how long it took him to adjust to prison food.

"Years. It took years. Some people never get accustomed to it."

What was the turning point?

"Finally accepting the situation you're in. That you're not going anywhere until they release you."



**F**ood is also served three times daily to the inmates at Westville Control Unit, its maximum-security ward, aka “supermax.” Two types of offenders get a ticket here: 1) Those whose behavior while incarcerated necessitates segregation from the general prison population, and 2) Shot-calling

gang leaders and inmates who committed a heinous crime.

The prison isn’t bragging when they call it supermax. To reach fresh air from lockup requires getting past nine gates of electrified or impenetrable steel doors. Regardless of the guards and a separation of bulletproof glass, supermax

is a frightening place to be. The inmates know you’re there. Suddenly everyone appears at their cell-door window, a dozen pairs of eyes laser-trained in your direction. They scream at you. Through the glass partitions, we hear muffled banshee wails demanding to know our business.

For the correctional officers who deal with these hardest of the already-hard, protocol is to err on the side of extreme caution. They're required to serve food in pairs while wearing body-armor vests. One officer's job is to lock and unlock the cuff door, the steel flap where food slides through, while the other delivers the tray through the slot. Even for murderers, food hygiene is imperative, so guards wear latex gloves and hairnets while serving.

Truth be told, most of the time the place is more boring than dangerous.

"Boring is good, it's just a nice easy day for everybody," says Sgt. Carrie Sipich, a ten-year veteran at Westville.

In Sipich's domain, rapists and killers are schoolchildren who get occasionally unruly, like when they throw trays or swallow razor blades. Nothing shocks her anymore. One time when an inmate inserted a plastic spork up his penis hole, her reaction was an exasperated, "Really?"

She says: "I need a vacation because I'm laughing at things that aren't funny."

Horror stories about prison food reach their unappetizing nadir in the form of one particular dish. Its official name on Aramark Correctional Services recipe card M5978 is "Disciplinary Loaf." Inmates know it as "Nutraloaf," a baked foodstuff with the express purpose of providing the required daily nutrients and calories, and nothing more. Flavor isn't an afterthought, it's discouraged.

Nutraloaf's awful reputation is built upon myth, which simultaneously serves as a deterrent for bad behavior. No one I talk to has ever been punished with Nutraloaf, but everyone knows someone who has. Nutraloaf is reserved for offenses such as taking part in a riot or assaulting prison staff. Violators get

placed in segregation and served a nineteen-ounce brick of Nutraloaf twice daily, typically for three consecutive days or until, in the words of Indiana Department of Corrections spokesman Doug Garrison, it achieves its intent of "behavior modification." Sgt. Sipich says she's only seen it served to two offenders in her tenure.

Officially, Nutraloaf is a blend of shredded cabbage, grated carrots, dry pinto beans, mechanically separated poultry, dairy blend, soy oil, scrambled-egg mix, and twenty-four slices of bread. It's shaped into a loaf and baked at 375 degrees for fifty to seventy minutes.

But Jesse Miller, serving in Westville for armed robbery, says he cooked Nutraloaf when he worked in the kitchen at another prison. He claims the recipe is more slapdash: "Say a meal was pudding, meat, green beans, potatoes. They throw that all in a blender. They'll throw Kool-Aid powder in it too. They can't say, 'I didn't get my juice.' 'Yes you did, it's in the Nutraloaf.' Then they pour it in a pan like pancake batter. It looks like vomit. I tasted it. It had no taste. It was like eating a sponge."

I didn't get to try Nutraloaf, but Jeff Ruby, dining critic at *Chicago* magazine, wrote about sampling it shortly after the Cook County Illinois Department of Corrections began implementing the Aramark recipe in June 2010. This is how he described it: "a thick orange lump of spite with the density and taste of a dumbbell ... 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."

Kelly Banaszak, a spokesperson for Aramark, says its recipes are developed by registered dieticians: "While nutrition plays a big role, variety, taste, eye appeal, among

others are considered in creating healthy, satisfying meals every day."

Aramark is the largest provider of prison-food services in the country, serving one million meals a day in more than 500 correctional facilities. For governments, privatizing prison-food services is an easy cost saver. Aramark, which also provides food for schools and sporting venues, holds contracts with six state-prison systems. That includes the Indiana Department of Corrections, which saved \$7 million in the first year it contracted with Aramark in 2005. This year, that cost breaks down to \$3.717 per Indiana prisoner per day.

When food costs are regimented and calculated to the tenth of a cent, inmate satisfaction takes a backseat. At an Aramark-contracted Kentucky prison in 2009, dissatisfaction over food was a contributing factor to a riot in which six buildings were set on fire. At the state hearing, a correctional officer present at the riot said that food quality plays a role in prison safety: "If you're hungry, you're going to get ornery."

In the recorded history of inmates vs. prison food, inmates usually end up on the losing side. In 2009, state budget woes forced the Georgia Department of Corrections to eliminate Friday lunches. It had already cut lunch on weekends, compensating with larger portions during breakfast and dinner. In 2010, Cook County Jail in Chicago stopped delivering breakfasts to inmates at four thirty in the morning, opting instead to serve it in the chow hall. Sheriff Tom Dart said he expected inmates would choose sleep over breakfast, at a savings of \$1 million a year.

I bring this up with John Schrader, Westville's public information officer. He strikes a balance of empathy with the inmates while

batting down many of their conspiracy theories. One persistent rumor is that kitchen workers once discovered a food box that read: “For zoo use only.” Another is that the kitchen will “stretch out” the meals by adding water. Untrue, Schrader says.

He says the reality lies somewhere in the middle. For example, once a month the prison organizes an outside-food day with a local restaurant, like the Westville Dairy Queen, where inmates can order burgers and Blizzards. (The restaurant gets a five-digit payday; Westville gets a cut of the sales.)

He agrees the food at the prison is bland and portion sizes are tight. But he also says inmates should have realistic expectations.

“Food cannot be used as a disciplinary measure. I can’t say you’re getting less food because you’re acting out. Food is essential. It’s a basic human right. But we’re also not going to give you shrimp,” Schrader says. “It’s not the quality of what you can get out in the real world. But is it something that’s bad? Absolutely not. If I really wanted to be healthy, I’d stop eating at home and start eating three meals a day here.”

Charlie Smigelski, a registered dietician from Boston, disputes the notion that prison food is healthy. Smigelski briefly worked in the Suffolk County Massachusetts House of Corrections as a medical-care contractor. He seems particularly aggrieved speaking about his experience: “At my prison, vegetable is a joke. You might get seven or eight carrot coins at supper, some wimpy lettuce. No one is looking at quality. Calories are made up by sugar—heavily sugared peaches and pineapple. They’re living on white rice, pasta, and four slices of bread. Commissary food is by and large abysmal as well. Prison is supposed to be about the loss of liberty, not loss of life.”

This idea of prison foods—mainly, “What is good enough?”—requires a fair bit of philosophical reconciling. Constitutional scholars have argued the extent to which prisoners’ rights are afforded ever since the 13th amendment was adopted: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States.” These terms leave a lot of leeway for interpretation when it comes to deciding what’s for dinner in lockup.

One argument is the inmates broke societal law and deserve to be here, thereby forfeiting their right to complain about the mushiness of food. Another is that taxpayers foot the bill, so if they don’t like the watery goulash, well, tough shit. The counterargument is that the \$3.717 spent on each prisoner covers not only food costs, but labor, paper towels, and cleanup supplies, plus equipment repairs. At that price, you cannot possibly provide sustenance resembling anything a free citizen would deign to call food.

But is being fed poorly inhumane? Should criminals be deprived of any pleasure from food? Isn’t that counterproductive if the purpose of imprisonment is rehabilitation?

Prisoner advocacy organizations exist in every state, in the form of religious groups and the ACLU, but getting substantive legislative reform for prisoners’ rights is perhaps the steepest of uphill battles. For one, making the voting public empathize with criminals is a hard sell.

“I think prisoners are the most dehumanized people in our society by far. There’s no comparison,” says Jean Casella, co-director and Editor-in-Chief of Solitary Watch, an organization that studies prison conditions, specifically solitary confinement. “What the public will

tolerate in terms of how badly we treat prisoners is really bad.”

In her reporting on inmates kept in segregation, Casella tells me one of the most common privileges to be revoked is access to commissary food. “I question the idea of food deprivation on top of losing your freedom. Within prisons, there’s no judge or jury. It’s prison officials deciding if you go to solitary and be deprived of sunlight and human contact. It’s prison officials who put you on Nutraloaf. I think it’s barbaric.”

Jean Terranova is now director of food and health policy at Community Servings, a Massachusetts agency providing medically tailored meals to people with critical illnesses. When she was a criminal defense attorney, she remembers seeing clients go into prison and within a short period of time, start looking like a different person. “They’re not getting the proper nutrition, they become lethargic. You’re creating a litany of physical and behavioral health problems by being short-sighted at the beginning and not seeing the huge costs in health care later.”

A 2010 report from the American Medical Association warns: “The high concentration of long-term inmates, with their corresponding increase in health-care needs as they age, has contributed to concerns about the nutritional adequacy of their diets as a means of preventing and managing chronic disease.” The report projects that by 2030, more than one-third of prisoners in the U.S. will be over the age of fifty.

“Food is such an important part of the lives of people who are confined. With so many restrictions on their daily lives, meal time is one of the very few activities prisoners have to look forward to,” Terranova says. “If you give them good food, it could vastly improve the psychosocial dynamic of the place.”

Whether or not you believe prisoners deserve decent meals, the fact remains that prison food is terrible, full stop. So in many cases, inmates take matters into their own hands. Every two weeks, prisoners with enough money (mostly through the generosity of outside family) can order snack foods from commissary. The type of food available is stuff you'd see in the nonperishable aisle at 7-Eleven: summer sausage, precooked rice, cheese, tuna pouches. Well-off inmates will use up every dollar of their \$70 limit per order. Those without outside financial support have a tougher go—prison jobs only pay around \$25 a month, and most of that is spent on soap, toothpaste, socks, and other necessities.

Antonio Bishop, in Westville for arson, puts it bluntly: "If you don't have commissary food, you'll never make it."

Goods bought through commissary are the currency of the underground prison market, where services are rendered in exchange for food, even if prison policy prohibits the practice.

"If you want someone to draw a portrait for your family, you pay them in commissary," says Zach Adams, serving for parole violation. "Maybe you have [postage] stamps and I don't. Or, you say, 'Make me a nice birthday card for my son, I'll give you some of my food.' I mean, you're not supposed to, but yeah, it's a black market."

Others tell me cigarettes and K2, a synthetic marijuana, are also traded for commissary food. The going rate for a prison tattoo is six soups, a meat log, and a few bags of chips—about \$5 worth of food. (Prison tattoo ink can be made by microwaving bottled hair grease; the



needle is fashioned from a piece of metal window screen.)

What's most remarkable to me is the culinary creativity the limited resources of prison yield. All Indiana Department of Correction offenders in dorms have access to an ice maker, hot-water dispenser, and microwave. That's enough to concoct some wildly elaborate dishes out of commissary food. At one of Westville's sister prisons, inmates

at Rockville Correctional Facility even published a fifty-three-page cookbook of commissary food recipes, from twice-baked potatoes to salmon soup.

I coaxed David Lawhorn into sharing his proprietary cookie cake recipe: "You take Oreo cookies, split them apart, and put the cream in a separate bowl. Take the cookies and crush it down. Then take Kool-Aid, not the sugar-free kind, put it with

the crushed-up cookies, and add Pepsi to make a batter. Microwave it for seven minutes, and it turns out fluffy, like a cake you'd put in the window that costs \$20. Take the Oreo cream and put that on top. I also sprinkle trail mix on mine."

Lazaro Valadez has earned some renown in dorm D-2 east for this dish: "Buy two bags of pork rinds, spicy Cajun mix, sweet corn, rice, and Kool-Aid tropical punch mix, not the sugar-free kind. You add the Cajun mix, corn, and pork rinds in a trash bag. Get Kool-Aid in a cup, mix it with a little bit of water until it's real thick, and pour it in the bag with the pork rinds. Mix all that up, and stick it in a microwave for six minutes. It comes out real gummy, and you layer that over rice. It's sweet and sour pork. It's not bad."

The most widely-traded commissary good is Maruchan-brand ramen noodles. Three bags cost \$1. As food goes, it's a versatile product: its noodles can be used as a starch base and the soup packet as seasoning salt. I watch Kamil Shelton crush his "Texas Beef"-flavored ramen, boil the broken noodles inside its bag, squeeze out excess water, stuff with sausage, and form into a cylinder: prison burrito. "It's better than what they feed us in chow hall," he says.

There's no actual chicken in the prison chicken nugget recipe, but commissary connoisseurs still manage to recreate the dish as a placebo food. Two inmates named Jan Kosmulski and Troy Peoples explain:

Kosmulski: "Take ramen noodles, boil it down to literally mush. You ball it up, put a piece of cheese and beef summer sausage in the middle. Make sure it's tightly wound up. You cook it in the microwave for ten minutes until it's brown."

Peoples: "It's not actually a

chicken nugget. It's the idea. It's only in your mind. If you ain't had a chicken nugget in a while, and it's in the shape of a chicken nugget, it'll remind you of a chicken nugget."

**I**t's commissary day at dorm A-3, and four inmates gather in the microwave alcove. They've pooled their resources, each buying specific ingredients, and for the last two hours they have collaborated on a food project. Ingredients are organized with precision like *mise en place* at a fine restaurant.

The chef de cuisine is Mike McClellan, who's earned the reputation as the Thomas Keller of cell-block A-3. McClellan, a soft-spoken forty-four-year-old man sentenced through 2017 for stalking, says Westville is the therapeutic community he needs to turn his life around. Having earned his associate's and bachelor's degrees, he's now at work on his master's. McClellan says he has two passions in life: Jesus Christ and cooking.

Pastor Mike, as he's known, spearheads two recipes today: tortellini and chicken Florentine soup. I try a sip of the latter, made from pouch chicken, garlic powder, ramen soup mix, powdered coffee creamer, and dried Thai rice noodles. It tastes as you might expect—one step above emergency-packet soup reconstituted with hot water.

I offer: "That's pretty good."

Pastor Mike corrects me: "No, that's excellent."

With tortellini, his attention to detail is even more impressive. Pastor Mike takes pizza dough from a Chef Boyardee pizza kit and simmers it in water for three minutes in a microwave. He lays out the cooked squares of pasta. Pastor Mike creates the filling by dicing pepperoni and pepper jack cheese with the

lid of a tin can. He hovers over his ingredients the way a molecular gastronomist hunches with tweezers.

He microwaves the filling with tomato pizza sauce and powdered creamer until it turns into a paste, which he encloses in dough and cooks once more in hot water. The finished product comes out as rustic crescents of dumpling, a nod to Pastor Mike's Italian heritage. For a moment the four cooks shed their prison wear and are dining at a fancy Italian restaurant. They eat like free men. Two hours toiling for a brief transportive respite from this forsaken place.

**T**here's a secondary market for these kinds of prepared foods. Down the hall in dorm A-3, three inmates sit around a metal bench strewn with candy. Their setup is a complicated assembly line involving a microwave, plastic bowls, a container filled with ice water, popsicle sticks, and parchment paper. It looks like a home chemistry kit.

The three have spent the last few hours making lollipops at a pace of one every five minutes. They'll spend the next few hours making lollipops, until their candy stash runs out.

The head chef is John Hopkins, whose goatee and thick glasses makes him resemble Walter White circa Season 3 *Breaking Bad*. Seated next to him is Frederick Betts, Jr. who incredibly, is a dead ringer for Jesse Pinkman circa Season 4 *Breaking Bad*.

Hopkins learned the lollipop trade from a fellow inmate, and since that inmate's release, Hopkins has taken over as resident candy expert. He estimates he's cooked up six hundred-plus lollipops, and has mastered all the subtleties of the art.

He explains that different confectionaries have different



melting points, depending on whether they are made of corn syrup or sugar. So they need to be cooked on a staggered schedule, with butterscotch discs going in the microwave first, followed by Jolly Ranchers, and Now And Laters last, which only need ten seconds to soften.

The mixture comes out of the microwave bubbling, which Hopkins immediately whips with a popsicle stick. At a precise moment, he dunks the bowl into an ice bath, which releases the hardening goo from its container. He wraps this with parchment paper and molds the lollipop by hand around the popsicle stick.

"Some guys, they make it flat and round, but it don't fit in the mouth that well," Hopkins says. "We make it into an egg shape. We say, 'customer friendly.'"

The base of the popsicle stick is marked with a letter. L is lemon drop. B is butterscotch. G is grape. I can already see these in a Brooklyn boutique, labeled PENAL SUCKERS and sold for \$4 a pop.

I ask John: "What are you in Westville for?"

"Manufacturing meth."

**R**on Edwards, 62, has worked within every aspect of the restaurant industry, from running the front-of-house at fine-dining establishments to owning his own place. Now, he teaches culinary arts to fourteen of the luckiest inmates at Westville.

Lucky, because students taste what they cook. When the alternative is goulash, chicken parmigiana is Christmas arriving twice a week.

Those accepted into the twelve-week cooking program are screened by case managers for past behavior and future potential, which is

why Edwards has never had a problem giving inmates access to sharp implements. Completing the program has major incentives, too—graduates get three months knocked off their sentences. The waiting list for this class is around half a year.

We arrive for a luncheon cooked entirely by Edwards' students. Today's guests are a mostly female-group who handle crisis management in the event a prison riot breaks out. The dining space is elegant in a way a mock restaurant at a high school home-economics program would be—adorned almost entirely in blue, decorated with portraits of inmates dressed in chef's whites.

A man with tattoos for sleeves brings out a starter course of shrimp cocktail. Shrimp cocktail! He does everything expected of a server at a white-tablecloth restaurant—walks through the dining room with erect posture, picks up silverware without a clank, and responds to your thank yous with, "You are very welcome." After the cocktail comes cream of broccoli soup and chef's salad with chopped ham. For the entrée: roast pork and gravy alongside mashed potatoes and "Hoosier beans," which are green beans with sautéed bacon and onions. Dessert is cheesecake with blackberries.

"Someone at the local newspaper recently asked for one of the inmates' recipes. It's the first time they're in the paper for something good, and not in the crime blotter," Edwards says. "The class is about teaching them the basic things about life. They don't have a lot of confidence. We try to instill that."

After the luncheon guests depart, the cooks and servers sit in the blue room to feast on their efforts. They eat their massive

portions in silent preoccupation. If you remember that scene in *The Shawshank Redemption* where an exclusive group of inmates enjoy an ultra-rare treat of cold beers on the rooftop, you'll have a sense for the joy of these Westville men.

I ask them about what it means to lose the freedom to eat what they choose, and they begin to reminisce wistfully. Adam McDonald brings up his grandmother, who made him appreciate food at age ten when she taught him to cook steaks and grilled cheese sandwiches. He worked at several fast-food chains before getting sent to Westville for burglary. When he's released in six months, McDonald says he'd like to cook in a fine-dining restaurant.

"In a prison system, there are times you look around and you don't feel like anything," McDonald says. "To eat off of glass dishes and metal forks instead of plastic bowls and spoons... I've been in a better mood since I started this class."

While serving a thirteen-year sentence for cocaine possession, Jauston Huerta became a published author—writing a children's book called *Micheliana & the Monster Treats*. It's about a dragon that attacks a village, and the young princess who hatches a plan to feed the dragon to stop its rampage.

Huerta says, "Next to my family, food is a definite component that's a constant reminder my freedom has been taken. Because I have to eat something I don't want to eat. It causes you to really appreciate your freedom and what you left behind out there."

A kitchen worker walks by with a platter filled with shrimp cocktail.

Huerta's eyes follow. "That's the point. That's the point."

Says McDonald: "... to feel human again." **LP**