

LUCKY PEACH



COOKS & CHEFS

ESSAYS

Baking to Sobriety

How jail and baking helped one man get his life back together.

By **SIMRAN SETHI**

Before he was one of Denver's most beloved bakers, John, whose baked goods are described as the "[stuff of legend](http://www.westword.com/restaurants/pie-guy-john-hinman-opens-11-000-square-foot-bakery-in-park-hill-7435069)," served time in Colorado's [Broomfield Detention Center](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXJbKIPU2Vs) for driving under the influence. This is his story. —Simran Sethi

I don't learn easy. I learn hard.

I was sentenced to ninety days in the [Broomfield Detention Center](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXJbKIPU2Vs)—the county jail for Broomfield, Colorado—as the result of a DUI. Well, three DUIs. One in New York, two in Colorado.

I was sentenced on Good Friday. My mom was there in the courtroom. She and I both knew I was going to jail, but we didn't know when or for how long. We thought we'd get to spend Easter together, but, to our surprise, the officers led me to a holding cell directly after sentencing. Mom was so distraught she stood up as they were leading me away and

shouted, “Who’s going to make the lemon meringue pie?”

That person was supposed to be me.

I was “the pie guy” at my job as a pastry chef—I got my nickname entering and winning pie-making competitions. I figured if I wanted to be the best, I had to *beat* the best—and when you’re beating grandmas, you know you’re in good shape.

The night I was put in jail, I was anything but. It was raining. It was cold and loud. I was terrified. I mean, come on, any jail movie you’ve seen... it isn’t pleasant. Nothing happened to me, but, like in the movies, everything was chaotic: the two TVs, the people in the hall, the doors—it all echoed. The pod had thick, oak doors with those small windows hatched with wire. Everything happened in that pod. It’s where we ate, where we watched TV and played cards, where our cells were. You couldn’t go anywhere in that pod without hearing the clink of those doors and the sounds of them being buzzed open and closed. *Buzz, clink. Buzz, clink.*

My cell was the width of two metal bunks. My bed, a stainless-steel shelf attached to a wall, was the size of a large commercial-kitchen table. It was about twice the size of a pastry table.

For the first few days, I didn’t eat anything. But on day four, I succumbed to the spaghetti. Not because of the smell, but because it looked familiar. Everything we ate and drank was seconds. I don’t know if *seconds* is the right term, but it was the lowest quality of everything that could be bought. The meat looked like it had been run over by a tractor, the bread was stale and superthin, and the apples were bruised. So I waited—until I decided to eat the spaghetti with the rubber meatball on top. Spaghetti I had to eat with the only utensil we were given: a fucking plastic spork.

Even though the food sucked, it defined the day. Or, at least, meal times did. They woke us up really early, around five-thirty or six. We’d eat breakfast—oatmeal and coffee—but it wasn’t real coffee. It was chicory, I think. After that, we’d just hang out or do work duty and then go back in our cells until eleven-thirty. After that was lunch. Then we’d sit around until three, and the guards would send us back to our cells until dinner around five-thirty.

Spaghetti, mystery meat, corn bread, some sort of chicken dish, sloppy joes, a pot-roast thing, canned peas and corn—those were the kinds of

things we ate. I don't remember a lot of it. I didn't look forward to any of it.

I **didn't end** up in the food business because of my love for it. It started when I waited tables during college and I spilled a tray of iced teas down a customer's back. I was sent to the back of the house to peel garlic for the marinara sauce.

I was in college, partying—and work at restaurants allowed me to do more of it, those long hours and late nights of drinking on and after the job. If I wanted to sustain that lifestyle, I thought I'd better get good at cooking. People assumed I had this crazy passion for food, but I actually had a crazy passion for drink.

Everybody in the industry knows one another; you know the door guy so you can get into the club, the bartender who'll comp you drinks, that sort of thing. My friends and I would get off work, go to another friend's restaurant, and drink there until they closed. Then we'd go to the bar where our other friends worked. After the bars closed, somebody always had a key to some cabinet or stash we could get into.

I became good at baking out of necessity. I had no history with it or emotional connection to it. It was just something I picked up and improved at to keep me in the business. I got good at it so I'd have some power. But then, I gave up that power. I chose alcohol over that talent—over my work, my relationships, my life.

I **wasn't the** only cheffy person in there. There was my cellie, who was an ice cream maker, plus line cooks and a server. My buddies and I would fashion meals out of what we could get from the commissary. We had money in the bank that someone from the outside had put in that we could use to buy Little Debbie—style oatmeal treats, Doritos, snacks like that. We used to mix Fritos and beans inside Doritos bags and microwave them so we'd have something flavorful to eat. We'd sit around watching bad movies on TNT and eat them with our sporks.

We'd also make up stories about food: "Oh my God, what if this were real bacon on a burger from Smashburger?" With whatever we were eating, we'd reminisce about the best version of that food we'd ever eaten. And I knew that when I got out, I wanted a Reuben from the Two

Dog Diner in Longmont.

What I didn't know then was that, a few short years later, I would be baking the bread for those same sandwiches. That I would own a bakery whose walls were the same grayish-white color as the walls of the jail. And that my freedom would come in the shape of that eleven-thousand-square-foot space.

When I got out, I tried not to go back. I started and quit eleven jobs. There are harassment and prejudice in both worlds—and few choices; you do what the warden or the chef says.

And, of course, there was alcohol. They say, “Alcoholism is a disease of the lonely.” Whiskey brought me out of my shell. It helped me grapple with the person I thought I had to be to survive in the world and in that environment: the relentless demands, the unkindness to one another, the egos, the practical joking at somebody else's expense.

In my heart of hearts, I wasn't that guy the industry wanted me to be. But I'm responsible for all of it. At certain points, every one of my employers in the years before I landed in jail had reached out to help me—they tried to talk to me, they bailed me out of jail, they offered to help me get treatment—but I never accepted. It was easier for me to blame them for my behavior, to justify it, than to accept their help. The fact is, I lived in my own personal jail nearly my entire life; I only spent ninety days in an actual jail.

I spent Easter after my sentencing in a holding cell, a sort of pre-jail. There were only four people in there instead of the fifteen it could hold. I asked the guard if he had any information on sobriety. A kid in another cell heard me and passed me a book, which I flipped open to the St. Francis prayer: “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light...” Going in there—to jail—and what got me there was the opposite of that prayer, but it also foreshadowed what I try to do now.

Now I try, through my bakery, to create an environment that is an alternative to the ones I've worked in. I'm sober and I'm free. Having a

bakery forces me to rely on others and ask for help, to be vulnerable. I want to create a safe, non-abusive workplace with good wages where people stay connected to who they are. I want to cultivate a community of bread and pastry people. I want to bring people in, let them use portions of the bakery, and help them manifest their visions while also working toward a common goal.

I want to prove there can be a different way to be in this industry. That's the vision of this bakery. But what does that look like? How do you foster others' dreams and build community and keep the lights on? I'm still figuring that out. We still have to make hamburger buns; we have to play the game to survive. But each time we get ahead, with a bit more money, we go for the local honey or the better sugar. And we all got Mother's Day off.

We're still figuring this out. I'm in way over my head, but for now it's okay. I didn't know the reality of how the business worked from the perspective of an owner, but I have faith in myself and in my team that things are going to work out the way they will—and that they'll be all right. I have to have faith—it's what keeps me sober. Today.

They say that when you get off alcohol, you only have to change one thing: everything. The only things I brought with me into this new life were the pies. They were the starting-over point and the beginning of where I am today. For me, being sober is less about not drinking and more about being a productive member of society. Ingredient by ingredient, day by day.

Hotel and restaurant workers have the highest rate of illegal drug use and rank third for heavy alcohol consumption (five or more drinks during a single occasion on five or more days in the past thirty days) in the country, second only to miners and construction workers. One resource for those seeking help is the confidential, free Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) hotline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Treatment centers can also be found through SAMHSA's [online locator](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/) (<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>).

BAKING, JAIL
