



Prison Bitch



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38671-018

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/prisonbitch>

This version was published on 2016-12-04

ISBN 978-0-692-81638-7



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Dining Experiences

Okay. I get it. I know the serenity prayer. I can accept that my current residence is not exactly Aunt Lisa's Finishing School for Felonious Debutantes. However, the phrase "raised by wolves" comes to mind far too often in these surroundings. The sound of grown human beings smacking food, slurping drinks, and eating with their mouths open makes my skin crawl. The inventor of earplugs is my hero.

I can't claim to have been born with impeccable table manners. As a small child I ate so noisily, my parents finally put my plate on the floor with the dogs' dishes. They told me that if I insisted on eating like an animal, I would have to eat with the animals. In that act, I saw my childhood fantasy of eating Thanksgiving dinner at the big kids' table abruptly dissolve. Traumatized? Maybe. Eating with my mouth closed thereafter? Definitely!

There are no toddlers in the federal prison system. I live among grown women. Of course, the administration can be part of the problem. Most places provide plastic forks, knives, and spoons for our use during mealtime. In mid 2009, the camp I was living at discontinued the knives. This makes eating fruit a little tricky. Try peeling a frozen orange with your fingernails. And don't wait until it's thawed. We're not to leave the dining hall with fruit.

We generally get an apple, orange or grapefruit daily with breakfast and lunch. Mind you, this is stuff we wouldn't slop the hogs with back home. Bruised apples, green oranges, always frozen. Once a week the government banana. The one I got this morning was green.

At my own peril I stealthily smuggled it back to the dorm. It's stashed out of sight, hopefully to ripen and be eaten before it's confiscated or worse. I'm actually risking disciplinary action being

in possession of fruit (or anything else, served by food service rather than purchased on commissary outside of the chow hall. That's me, always living on the edge.

The lack of knives does nothing to help us feel ladylike when the main course is, say, roast beef. It's often debated whether the meat we're fed is fit for human consumption. Knives can be ineffectual when cutting more gristle than meat. But without a knife we are left to pick up meat with our hands and bite off a hunk. This is just as dainty as it sounds. I enjoy doing this while whipping my head from side to side and growling. Raised by wolves, indeed.

Having worked as a banquet server in college, I sometimes think back on the elaborate place settings for wedding parties. One spoon and one fork? I think not! Only at Club Fed.

We eat in the dorm too. It's lovely. In 2008, the day of the Democratic National Convention, it was my TV day. There were two televisions per 170 inmates so this was an event. Plus, I was a political science major in college, so I was quite excited. I took a vacation day from my prison job to watch CNN all day long. Well except for that part of the day when I broke up a fight between my roommate and my friend in the TV room and it was temporarily locked down as a crime scene... But that's a story for another chapter.

The evening of the convention just as the late Ted Kennedy was introducing Barack Obama to accept his party's nomination, in walked Gwen. Everyone was leaning forward on the edge of their seats, greedily taking in every word of this historic event, when Gwen started eating. Loud and disgusting best sums it up. Someone turned up the volume. Everyone was now staring at Gwen. A couple of my friends gave me pleading glances as if to say "it's your TV day, do something!" Well, I can't say I'm known for my discretion or political correctness, but no one expected what came next. "Gwen," I said. She looked up at me, startled. "We don't smack our food like that in here," I concluded. She glanced down at her bowl, wiping off

her chin, and abruptly left the room.

There was a collective sigh of relief, now that we could continue watching without cringing. Immediately, Shamika shot me a look like, "What was that?" I said simply, "Well, it worked!" The legend of my outspokenness grew.

The biggest problem with voicing my concerns about this, is that I provide certain malicious others with the precise ammunition with which to get under my skin. If anyone in that TV room later wanted to antagonize me for whatever reason – or more likely no reason at all, they could sit next to me in the dining hall and eat in an uncivilized fashion. I gave them the tools to needle me by speaking up. Knowing this, there's not much really worth expressing displeasure about. Writing this is cathartic for that reason. There's nowhere else to vent.

Most women's camps in Club Fed are constructed with no doors on the concrete cubicles and you can see over the walls. They don't go up to the ceiling. In other words, it's far from soundproof. When I was up north, Patsy lived across the hall from me. Her smacking went unmuffled over my wall, through my doorless doorway and straight for my highly sensitive ears. At the first onslaught of her offensive sound, I would scramble for my earplugs. The relief was instant and immeasurable.

I often help others with crochet or knitting projects. I've become good at this as there is only so much to do in prison. I got a pattern published in a national crochet magazine recently, and currently teach the knitting class through recreation.

One day while I was helping Patsy with baby booties for her then-unborn twin granddaughters, she came across the hall with a question. Steadily smacking her food, she entered my room. I backed her up, stating, "We don't smack our food like that in here." She swallowed and asked her question. I find that if people want something from you, they manage to appease your your sensibilities

until they get what they want. Then their nasty habits are just as ingrained as ever, but the respite is Heavenly.

I have to wonder, while unwillingly listening to people eat, “Is that your mating call?” I mean once you’re unleashed on society, assuming a man would ever invite you to break bread with him, will you sound like that? And if not, why are you suppressing all manners and decency for our benefit? Did you teach your children, or anyone else’s, to eat like that? I’m just sayin’.

Oh well, I guess if I must be remembered for something from my incarceration, it may as well be: We don’t smack our food like that in here. The old adage goes, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.” So I’ve made my stand.

Some of the food we’re served is not so bad. You will find the actual five-week national menu at bop.gov, along with the commissary form of each institution. But beware, you may not always recognize what’s dished up as what you remember from your previous life.

Salisbury steak used to be featured on the menu. It looked and tasted suspiciously like the Swiss steak, country fried steak, dark meat chicken patty, and round fish (as opposed to square or triangle fish) patty. This was so unsettling to me that I finally called my mom and asked her to send me photos of her homemade version of all those culinary delights. I was certain these were not all identical, distinguished by only their sauce or gravy, or whether they were deep fried. My suspicions were confirmed not only with photographic evidence but also upon overhearing food-service workers referring to the dreaded “all-purpose patty.” Ewww! How over processed is that? At one point I became a jail vegetarian. This means what it sounds like, no meat while locked up.

The night I’m released, the plan is to have some of mom’s home-made chicken and dumplings. Not the cooked tortilla kind. The thick fluffy ones on the front of the Bisquik box. Or at least the ones on there in 1999, when I last tasted edible dumplings, and freedom.

I can't force myself to eat something that looks like a solid ball of lard and is served in a pan of chicken which includes the bones and skin. My phrase for those recycled leg and thigh quarters is, "Guts, feathers and all." And it fits.

I've had my fill of chicken leg and thigh quarters for many lifetimes. When I get out I pray I never see another. Or that whoever offers me one will understand my nose crinkling reaction.

From 2004-2009, I was at a camp up north which was still using food packaged for Desert Storm. Yes that's right, the first Gulf War, 1991. Served over 13 years later, like it was the most natural turn of events in the world. Can you say "preservatives?" Worst were the pans of chicken teriyaki (chicken – sumpin' – yucky). Bite it and experience the release of gases that could just about get you high. The hamburger patties could've passed for Ken-L ration. They were so horrid, there is no way of dressing them up to make them edible. Most women wouldn't go to lunch when they were served. Even the smell of cooking them was nauseating.

However, if we didn't go, they would last forever. There isn't often a meeting of the minds among female inmates, but we all agreed to claim our burgers and throw them away. Then they would run out sooner rather than later, and have to be replaced with something else. Note, I didn't say something better. I've learned not to count my chickens before they're hatched.

In retrospect, at least said beef could be chewed, swallowed and digested, unlike what we get here in Florida. So, at least there is always a bright side. My cup is always half-full, at least.

Food service staff can be just as unappetizing as the delectable dishes they create for us. Most of their concerns do not seem altogether food related. More important than what or how they feed us seems to be our attire when we go to eat. Hats, do rags, rollers, perm rods, scarves, or anything else on the noggin is strictly verboten. Where I live now, sunglasses cannot be propped up on your head, and I have even been ordered to remove a commissarypurchased

headband from my hair while approaching the dining hall for lunch. All this despite the fact that the air-conditioning in the chow hall makes it feel like a meat locker, my hair feels like ice, and I get goose bumps on my scalp. But employees keep their hats on. Go figure.

Also, only the work uniform will suffice for breakfast or lunch during the week. Even if breakfast is at 6 AM and work begins at 7:30, don't attempt to wear gray sweats or shorts to breakfast even if you go to work out before breakfast, it won't fly here. Of course it makes no sense! That's the BOP way. Does that stand for Bureau of Prisons or Backwards on Purpose? You be the judge.

My favorite indiscretion in the chow line is the untucked shirt. At lunch time on weekdays we must have our shirts tucked into our pants. And none of this fancy folding it over so that it looks like it's tucked in either. Staff will zero in on you and approach like they're on a serious mission, only to tell you to tuck in your shirt. You would expect this degree of diligence at the prospect of bombs, drugs or escape, but only untucked T-shirts incite this sense of urgency here. I will not get my tray of not fit for human consumption food unless I'm satisfactorily tucked. Okey-doke.

There are many jail delicacies not served in the kitchen. Recipes are in this volume, for you to try at home, if you're dying of curiosity. Remember to buy generic brands and make sure they're stale to enjoy the complete culinary experience.

All these dorm dishes require microwave cooking. And many of them stink to high heaven. This smell permeates the whole dorm and sometimes our hair and clothes. It's lovely. The one that reeks of fish and puke is my personal favorite, you won't find that in this book.

Like televisions, there are two microwaves per 170 or so women. Most places don't bother with hot water dispensers. This means when I want a cup of instant coffee, which I never would have ingested pre incarceration, while enjoying the gourmet coffees of the world, I wait for a microwave behind people cooking vats

of scary-looking, nasty-smelling slop for what seems an eternity. Fights over the microwaves are frequent. It's great fun! I've actually seen people holding up the line claiming they needed to preheat the microwave. Seriously.

Even if lessons in etiquette were offered, I'm afraid those who need them wouldn't sign up. That would be even more frustrating than the lip smacking status quo. Given all these adventures in prison food, is it any wonder such a huge segment of the population has serious eating disorders? I had an anorexic roommate, one with exercise bulimia, and one with regular purging bulimia.

Without wanting to, I learned of a particular shower favored by bulimics. The floor grate could be pushed away from the drain with a flip-flop for unobstructed puking. Apparently, the running water would drown out the retching sounds. This was favorable to a toilet stall, where others would hear and inquire as to well-being, or worse, snitch to the psychology department.

I remember after an ice cream social one afternoon, everyone headed to the bathroom to wash their dishes, when the girl in whose honor the party was being held, called after them "No puking!!" Really.

If you like good, healthy food, this is not the place to be. I haven't seen broccoli or cauliflower for a year and a half. Tonight's menu promises the chef salad that we get once every 35 days. However, due to produce problems, we will get tacos instead. If we ever ask for anything not on the menu, we are told "It's not on the menu!" However, when staff chooses to change the menu, we are not to question that. I thought that was the point of adopting the national menu a couple of years ago. Be mindful, some things are grossly exaggerated on the menu. Grilled ham and cheese, for example, gets us grilled cheese with turkey bologna, which we unflatteringly refer to as "wet meat." I have never had ham here.

As you can probably guess, when the menu dictates 'baked pot, oven brown pot or mashed pot', alas, they do not serve us pot.

This means potatoes, sometimes mashed with the skins on. There is so much more to cover on this food rant, lemme just sum it up with....Plecchh!

I thank God I was blessed with strong, healthy teeth. Imagine being toothless or having painful tooth problems and trying to eat an apple without a knife. Hard to believe there are so many obese women in prison.

Ms. Kate Moss famously said, "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels." If this is true in real life, it's exponentially so in the BOP. But I guess other factors are in play here, mostly poor self-esteem. Still, this is an opportunity to develop healthy habits and resolve outstanding issues. Unfortunately, most women use their time criticizing other women here rather than analyzing their own issues in life.

Chew on that.

I have a couple ways of lightening the tone in food service. When I used to eat the leg and thigh quarters (which were never the size or quality of Church's Chicken or KFC), I would look down at my tray and tell the line server, "My chicken was on the Herbalife diet!" Better yet, when given a big, fat Polish sausage, especially with male food service personnel in earshot, I would look up, feigning confusion and earnestly ask, "Where do you put the batteries?" That's always good for a laugh.

All this, to say nothing of the singular experience of standing in line for the sub-standard food. We have one particular food service officer who finds it entertaining to call the units, rather than in their posted weekly meal rotation, all at once for dinner. This results in nearly 500 women forming two lines, extending the length of the dining hall and out both the exit and entrance doors. Before the line is even inside the doors, he will gleefully announce, "Mainline is closed!"

These announcements are often interesting unto themselves. They

tell us more about whoever is making them than whatever drivel is being dispensed through the speakers. One man enjoys announcing breakfast, loudly, knowing most of us are trying to sleep. I can only surmise that he is a frustrated disc jockey based on how he seems to relish hearing his own voice. Probably that career frustration springs from his complete and utter lack of communication skills. I'm just guessing.

His favorite announcement, at full volume, is "Mainline is noooooooooowww open." I swear the man can make the word 'now' last a full seven seconds. This is not entertaining or endearing. He reportedly believes we'd miss it if he were to discontinue this annoying practice. Because he's daft. But again, I'm guessing.

When your housing unit is released for chow is generally determined by a weekly sanitation inspection. At a prison we are actually locked in the unit until it's our turn to eat. This is no big deal at a small camp, with only two to four units. At a larger prison, however, it becomes an issue.

At the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) in Danbury, Connecticut, there are 13 housing units, each averaging well over 100 women. If your unit is last, you may not be released until 6 p.m. At Danbury, the rec yard closes at dusk. If you were hoping to jog at dinnertime, you're going to be upset with the slovenly person who didn't make their bed or sweep the floor. And everyone in the unit will know whose fault the unit's failing inspection boils down to. Even if the food is hideous, you want to be released from the unit first.