HOW TO MAKE TAMALES IN PRISON

It all depends on community—and a complicated supply chain.

BY JASON HERNANDEZ

When I met 42-year-old Jason Hernandez of McKinney, Texas, a year ago, I listened to him describe how he spent most of his young adulthood in prison after a disproportionately harsh sentence. I heard some pain, little rancor, and a talent for storytelling. Eventually released from prison, Hernandez now helps incarcerated people petition for release or lighter sentences. When we were done talking about the weighty stuff, he spontaneously and joyously riffed on the food that nourished him physically and spiritually in prison.

Below, he talks about running a food business behind bars. —Cynthia Greenlee

I CAME FROM A REGULAR FAMILY like anybody else. American tradition: mother and father, you eat at home, work, go to school. My parents would go to work, and we always had dinner at 5:00 or 4:30, like a family. Like no matter where you're at in the city or what have you, we come to the house at 4:30 because mom was going to have dinner.

Despite my mother and father being hard workers and very disciplined and religious, me myself, I just took to the streets. And got involved in drug dealing. Went to prison for life without parole, plus 320 years for a nonviolent drug crime at the age of twenty-one. Became a "jailhouse attorney" and there filed my own clemency petition. I wrote a letter to President Barack Obama asking him to release me. And he ultimately did. December 19th, 2013, he granted my petition for commutation and reduced my time to twenty years. Ultimately did nearly eighteen years in prison. I went in when I was twenty-one. I got out when I was almost thirty-nine.

I always tell people, if you want something figured out, how to do something, ask a prisoner. Because in there, they're always

Photographs by Cooper Neill

gonna figure out a way to make something happen. And they're going to be like MacGyver, very creative and innovative.

I had a friend named Lucky. He was a Mexican, too, just like me. And he was older than me. And people kinda looked at him like he was a grouch. I mean, the guy had a life sentence. He'd been in there eight or nine years. He had the right to be a grouch. But he wasn't. He was a real cool dude when you got to know him.

It's like a brotherhood of lifers. I lived in a cell right next to Lucky. Me being Mexican, Lucky being Mexican, Lucky was always mentoring me, giving me psychology books to read, books on my culture and heritage, giving me books that made me think about the brain.

But Lucky could cook. I'm not lying. I mean, he can make lo mein. He can make fried rice. He was a great cook, but he didn't cook for anybody. I got to say, he only would feed about three or four people, only Mexicans. He wasn't racist, but prison is very segregated.

One of the things that Lucky could do was make tamales. And he was real secretive about his recipe and how he went about it. We're Mexicans, right? Tamales are a kind of sacred to us.

You make tamales out of corn, out of masa. And obviously, we don't have the masa there.

He would get bags of Doritos. And I'd grind them and smash them as much as I possibly could until they actually turned back into almost a dust. Almost. Once you get that, then you put really, really hot water in there. Then you're mixing them; we get the butter from the kitchen delivered to us. And it turns right back to a masa and we start making these little balls smaller than a tennis ball.

But when Lucky left to transfer to another prison, I started to hustle. I had like my own little restaurant in there where I would sell food on the weekends.

One day, I think, 'Hey, you know, I'm going to make tamales for the Super Bowl.' Again, it was just a seasonal thing. You don't make tamales all the time.

The next thing you know, I mean, I actually got orders for half a dozen tamales, two dozen. Here I am, with one hundred-fifty to two hundred tamales. My celly and me stayed up to two or three in the morning before Super Bowl. But I have that entrepreneurial spirit, and I ended up doing it on a weekly basis.

When I sold drugs, I figured out how to network, how to market, the packaging, the distribution. So when I went to prison, I knew I could look back and sit back and say, 'OK. How do I get the food for tamales? How do I make them?' There's no way I could possibly do it myself.

So I have to recruit people. I told my friends, 'I'll pay you so much to crush the corn chips, so much to turn it into masa.' [I needed] somebody at the microwave who's cooking them as they're being made, someone to deal with delivery orders. Some would want a dozen of just bean and cheese ones, you had people who didn't eat meat. Then you have to think about the Muslim guys in there who didn't want pork. I was always just trying to accommodate everybody. I got to the point where selling maybe three hundred tamales Saturday through Sunday made me hundred, a couple hundred dollars.

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And I had friends that were in different units. I walked them through the process. I was way more open and more liberal than Lucky. They could start like their own little tamale business in their unit. In the big picture, there's a beauty to it and there's a whole community-building process. For however long you're in prison, you'd have a way to make money now. And it wouldn't affect my business.

How did we get the food? You put in an order just like you would out here if you're a chef and you own a restaurant.

In the actual prison unit where we sleep at and where the TV is, we have microwaves. We have what's called a commissary in there, like the canteen.

This was the federal system. It wasn't like what you'd imagine or what you'd get in state prison or what's on TV. In the morning there was biscuits and gravy. And every meal had a name to it. And I don't know if this is appropriate to say, but, you know, we called that 'shit on a shingle.' But you got all your vegetables and fruits and things to that extent. You also got more of the low-quality chicken or the low-quality fish. Beef patties. Baloney and stuff like that.

At the commissary, you could buy sausages. You could buy little bags of clams and oysters, octopus, mackerel, salmon, pork skins.

But the people that work in the kitchen, that actually cook us our food, they don't get paid. Or they get paid pennies. It's hard to cook for 2,000 people at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So the way that they make money is they, you know, I guess you could call it stealing.

They take stuff out of the kitchen, such as onions, bell peppers, tomatoes, broccoli, cabbage, and they smuggle that out of the secure room that they're in. And we buy them. There are what we called the runners. They're like Amazon delivery or UPS.

They go through all the checkpoints where there's guards searching people.

But they don't search everybody. You got ten pieces of chicken on you; you can't just hold them in a bag, stick them under your shirt, and have a big lump. So you want to get somebody that's kind of skinny already, so you would tape food around their stomach. They might get a waist trimmer, pack it around their waist.

They might get, like, six tomatoes in Saran wrap, taped to their calf, or put on those diabetic compression socks that go all the way up to your thighs. So it was not that unusual for a guy to have five onions in a row, on his knee down to his ankle, like, five onions in a row. If you don't make it through the checkpoints, you know, you don't get paid.

Yeah, there is a big economy. The vegetable prep guys, the butcher, those guys probably make about four or five hundred dollars a month. The runners probably make about half of that.

From my knowledge of federal prison, the currency is actually mailing stamps. But each individual stamp was a quarter, twenty-five cents, when I was in there. So if I tell you I want a dollar worth of curry and you bring me my curry, I'm going to give you four stamps. A tomato might be two stamps.

We had an officer whose name was Death Row. Whoever was going through there with something, he just knew. I mean, I don't know if he could smell food on somebody or whatever, but he knew everybody to pick out of a line.

So we would have to figure out, 'OK, what day does he work? What hours does he work if he's there? What type of distraction can we do?' It was funny because I'm gonna put like ten tomatoes on me, under my shirt and I'm going to act nervous. I'm going to have a little bulge on the side of my shirt. They're going to bust me with the tomatoes. But you guys come in with the rest of the twenty tomatoes, twenty bell peppers, the seasoning. We'd have the decoy get pulled over. Everybody else passes through.

In the unit, you would have a little trash can wrapped up with blankets around it, then a waist trimmer around the trash can. And then you have the ice in it, and you make a layer out of cardboard. And then you put food in there and keep it cold. So it don't go bad or bacteria starts to grow on it.

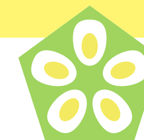
And the cooking process I learned from Lucky: You turn irons upside down and you make them stable. You have to tell the workers in the kitchen when you're ordering your food to bring some some pie pans, those little foil pie dishes. You put that pie pan on top of the iron, and it heats up just like a skillet almost.

I put my tamales and fried rice up against anybody's. I had a tamales cookoff with my mom. Everybody in the family loved mine. They only ate one of hers. I think my mom likes mine, but she won't admit it.

You know, life's not over for people that are in prison, right? I was a chef. I was a jailhouse attorney. I had a restaurant. I had my own franchise in there just about. At the end of the day, like, we're human. We still crave those things we grew up with: tamales, menudo, chicken-fried steak, whatever. Whatever your background or culture provided you.

One thing that I learned was if you feed someone like an animal (and they're caged up and having guards watch them all the time), they act like an animal. And at a prison where they fed you like a real human being, people acted more civilized. There's no such thing as a better prison, but there's a correlation between what and how you feed people and how they act. I think, without a doubt, that's true, whether for people in prison or even out here.

Cynthia R. Greenlee is deputy editor of Gravy.



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