

# Food Notes From an American Prison

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After the previous episode, in which Matteo Guidi talked about the ingenuity of Italian prisoners cooking in maximum security, Edward Hasbrouck got in touch to explain how surprising he found the freedom enjoyed by Italian prisoners. That didn't square at all with his experience in a federal prison in the USA.

**Edward:** The kinds of things that were described in *Cooking in Maximum Security*, the idea of allowing people to have a propane stove, or for that matter, an electrical stove ... In every prison, almost every jail, if there's any way people can get access to an electrical outlet in their cells or hack into the lights, people improvise little electrical devices to boil water. But the idea of an actual stove is utterly unthinkable in any American prison that I've ever heard of at any level. It would be considered a gross security risk, you know, right up there with having knives and perhaps as bad as having a gun, to have a cooking stove. I mean, that's a flammable explosive device. I was really shocked when I, when I read that in *cooking in maximum Security*.

**Jeremy:** What kind of prison was it? And I have to ask you, what were you in for?

**Edward:** I was there for having refused to register for military conscription in the United States. And that's a federal offence. So I was in a federal, in the federal prison system. And this was in the early 80s. I have to preface this all by saying that my experience was part of a particular time at what was at the time, a very, very innocuous corner of the American gulag and that while I can make light of it now and it was not a particularly ... Well, it's not an experience I would wish on anyone, but it was not a particularly terrible experience in any physical way. I do need to say the prisons and in particular the the federal prisons are vastly more overcrowded and the conditions are

vastly worse. And so things would be very different in many ways today.

But that said, I was ... It was a very high profile political show trial. There was a lot of press and public attention, and the Bureau of Prisons was quite concerned that I not make any trouble and that nothing bad happened to me. And they assigned me to sort of a backwater of the federal prison system, which was a prison camp on the grounds of a very large, very old, very high security prison at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. And that camp had originally been a working farm. Prisons run very significantly on the slave labor of the prisoners themselves. That makes imprisonment cheaper. So it had as recently as at least into the 60s, maybe 70s, been a working dairy farm and a vegetable farm, growing produce and producing milk products for the prisoners behind the wall of this maximum security prison.

**Jeremy:** So you say it was a minimum security kind of camp adjacent to or within a maximum security prison. Does that mean that cooking was allowed?

**Edward:** Outside of the official kitchen for the camp — and the kitchens were separate for the prison inside, which was worked by maximum security prisoners, and the prison for the camp, which was worked by camp prisoners — outside of those official kitchens, no cooking was allowed.

**Jeremy:** So what kind of cooking was going on then, under the shadows, as it were?

**Edward:** Well, maybe I could start by saying, talking about food more generally, because I think that cooking is only a piece of it. You know, food is very important. You said there might be riots over food. Well, there often are riots over food. And I think people on the outside sometimes wonder, why is food so important to prisoners, and what is it about food that's important? And it's not so much that the prisoners are necessarily being starved. That's not usually happening. And certainly in the place I was in, the food was adequate and probably some nutritionist had signed off on it and there was enough of it. It wasn't ... And it often isn't about people being starved, but what it is is that food is the most sensual pleasure that, even in the harshest regime, cannot totally be denied to prisoners. You're denied sex, you're denied human contact. Even physical human contact with other prisoners can entail risks and there's a hesitancy. So people

hold themselves out. You know, there may be some visual pleasure or there may not. The camp that I was in, we were actually able to go outside and we could see green growing things, which is a real luxury for prisoners, obviously. That was part of the attributes of it being a minimum security camp. And food can't be taken away.

They can put you in a place that's ugly, that you can't see anything pretty. They can deprive you of music or television or whatever else, but they can't totally deprive you of food. And so the question of, is there pleasure in the food, becomes very critical to is there any pleasure in prison life? And food has this importance. I mean, again, your life can be stripped down, especially if you're thrown in a punishment cell or whatever, or you're in a regime where you're locked in 24/7 forever. Food is one of the things that's left, you know. If you're in a place again, in a solitary cell or a cell block, there may be no natural light visible and other than the guards coming by to count you food is the only thing that marks the passage of time. So people tend to be focused on food.

And at the same time, I think there's a somewhat intuitive understanding of that by people on the outside who don't want prisoners to be able to have any pleasure in anything. The idea is to punish them, and part of punishing them is, well, we'll give them enough food to survive and it'll be healthy and nourishing, but we actually want it to be bland and boring and to lack any aesthetic pleasure.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, that is a very punitive attitude, I can see that. But so how do the prisoners get around the official food supply?

**Edward:** Well, there are several levels. I mean, there's sort of three channels, I would say, of food that come into a prison and the prisoners have access to it. One is the food that is purchased for prison use. Now, as I said, this camp had originally been a working farm, but at some stage the Bureau of Prisons had decided that slave labour was really inefficient and it was cheaper to buy food from the outside. And they shut down all the agricultural operations, which made the camp somewhat of a vestigial thing. It was still useful both as a place to park minimum security prisoners, and because they could provide some services that kept the maximum security prison running, but that maximum security prisoners wouldn't have been trusted to do. So they were the groundskeepers and the landscapers,

and they maintained the houses in the government-supplied housing for guards that was on the grounds of this reservation, which again, having been a farm, it was quite a large expanse around this sort of castle-like old prison. So all the food was being bought in bulk industrial quantities into this industrial kitchen where prison workers, under the supervision of both guards and prison supervisors — some of the prisoners knew more about cooking than the guards did — but anyway, they produced food for the, you know, the institutional chow hall.

But when food came in, the first thing that would happen is the guards would pilfer whatever was the best. If there were choice cuts of meat, you know, the guards would take their pick of them and take them down to their homes and whatever, feed them to their families. And then the prisoners who worked in the kitchen would pick out the best of what was left for their meal, which they would eat before serving the general prison population. And then when they were serving the chow line, they'd serve out the best bits of what was left to their friends and whatever, or whoever paid them off. And then the general prison population got what was left. So we were sort of literally at the bottom of the food chain.

Then there was a second channel, which was what you were allowed to buy from the commissary, and there was a limited repertoire of things that were available. And for commissary, you'd have to put in your order typically in advance, and then on commissary day you'd go and pick it up. And of course, you had to have money in your commissary account in order to do this. And if you wanted food, something that was sold at the commissary on a day that wasn't commissary day, or you were out of money in your account, you could buy it or for cash or on credit. The whole prison financial system is another layer on top of this food economy. But food was an important trade good. There were people who would sort of keep a little store where they'd buy extra from the commissary and keep a stash. So if you wanted corn chips on Tuesday and commissary wasn't until Thursday, you could go to the guy who kept a stock of corn chips, and you'd pay him more than you'd pay the commissary, but one way or another, you'd find a way to pay them and you'd get your corn chips. So that was a channel, but that was not very interesting food by and large. I mean, it did allow people to have some things that they were allowed to eat at hours that weren't the approved hours for

meals, which were short and early typically. And then, then there was the food that came in through completely illicit channels.

**Jeremy:** That's the one that really interests me.

**Edward:** And, you know, this was what really surprised me. You know, certainly there is smuggling into prisons. Some of it, some things come in through the visiting room. We were allowed contact visits, which were not really contact visits, but we weren't ... we didn't have a wall or a glass between us and our visitors, and there were only a couple of guards seated at one side of the room. So as long as you didn't get too physically affectionate, you could sit next to each other and you could whisper in each other's ears and you could pass small things. But you were going to be strip searched after the visit. So, you know, small amounts of drugs could come in that way. But food wasn't going to go very far. There was other smuggling. Some things were brought in by the guards. Guards are actually principal suppliers of smuggled goods to prisoners. There are corrupt guards everywhere, and some prisoners have quite a bit of money. So you could arrange for your contact on the outside to pay some money to the guard, and then they'd bring them in. I understand today the main commodity that goes in that way is the cell phones that come into prisoners prisons. But at that point it was mostly mostly drugs because it was expensive to bribe a guard and they still were under some scrutiny. So it tended not to be food. But then there were other things, for example, alcohol.

I realised pretty early on that like, there were cases of hard liquor floating around the dorm and hidden in corners in the prison. Where were these coming from? Well, after some period of general initial processing, everybody in the prison gets assigned to a job. Well, I'm a writer. I had experience as a graphic artist, as a bicycle messenger. These were not skills that were of any particular demand in the prison. They certainly weren't going to put me as a clerk in the prison office, where I might have access to things that I might leak. I was being watched pretty closely. So they assigned me someplace I had no skills at all, to the prison garage, which was basically prisoners under the supervision of a guard running the prison motor pool of all the vehicles that were used for landscaping and transport of prisoners and goods around the the compound, and took stuff in and out to the maximum security prison and also operated the garbage truck, which was driven by prisoners and went in every day to pick up the trash

from the maximum security prison and deliver contraband and take contraband and messages out.

It was a principal communications and trafficking of, smuggling, conduit in and out of the maximum security prison, one of very few that existed. And then these prisoners would actually, under guard supervision, drive the garbage truck out to the town, the city dump, and dump the trash and pick up contraband; boxes of things that would be left along the way that could be concealed in the trash. Now, the guards could have closed this loophole entirely if they just were willing to do the dirty work of taking out the trash themselves. But they like to have prison slave labour and this, it opened this huge hole. And the garbage truck also collected the trash in this housing compound, this sort of surreal pseudo-suburban compound of government housing for prison guards and their families. So they would drive down and pick up the trash. And of course, they'd scavenge whatever useful things might be found in the guards' trash. Or when renovations were done on the guards houses, they would pick up things like a stove, a refrigerator. These were dump pickings from the guards' housing unit picked up by the people who worked the garbage truck.

**Jeremy:** That's so ... It sounds, it sounds almost unbelievable. But they were ... Where did they bring the stove and the refrigerator and the other things they found?

**Edward:** Well, this is what happened. I got to the prison garage on my first day. And the guard who was running this, who was mostly he was an auto mechanic, okay? He was not by mentality a guard. This was a not uncommon situation. This was a prison town. The prison was the employer. It might be that his father and his grandfather had both worked at the prison. It was, if you wanted a job in this depressed semi-rural area was where you went to work. In other areas, you know, where there are more job opportunities, people might gravitate to being prison guards because they're sadists. But this guy wasn't by mentality a guard. He was just trying to keep the motor pool running, and he was happy to have a bunch of prisoners who knew as much or more about mechanics as he did, because there were a lot of people in that particular era, a lot of them were Vietnam veterans who had training in aviation, you know, helicopter mechanics. There weren't a lot of jobs in civilian industry after the Vietnam War ended. Where did they find jobs? Flying drug planes. And, of course,

the people, the bankers, didn't necessarily get caught when a drug shipment was caught. But the pilot and the mechanic who was allowed to keep this, you know, sacrificial plane that they tinkered together enough to make a one time flight, they would get caught. So there were plenty of people with a lot of mechanical aptitude and experience who thought merely working on cars was below them, but they knew what they were doing. And the guard interviewed me, realised I was useless, and he said to me, okay, you can go pump gas.

We've got a prison gas pump out on the backside of the garage, and your job is just to, you know, come out and fill up whenever any prison vehicle comes in. Again, this was before we'd completely transitioned to self-service gas. And besides, the guards liked having prisoners do their work for them. So I went around and there was this little office tucked in around the back side of the garage with one other old guy who greeted me pleasantly enough, who was elderly and not that mobile, and seemed happy to have a young attendant to actually be the one who ran out and pumped the gas whenever a guard vehicle pulled up. Okay, fine. And I was to keep a log. I quickly discovered that my predecessor had been reassigned because he actually tried to complain when he discovered that when he took the dipstick reading on the tank every day, it didn't agree because the guards were filling up their personal vehicles after hours from the prison pump. I just kept the records. They didn't agree, but I didn't say anything about it. Nobody ever audited it. Whatever. But I was told, just make sure that they ... Keep them happy so they don't come in here. Well, okay. Whatever.

But then the first time some prisoners driving one of the prison vehicles — again, these were trusted minimum security prisoners — pulled up, and they came in, and I pumped the gas in their truck and came back in, and they were sitting around having coffee. Where does coffee come from? Oh, have some coffee. And they chat because it turned out that although they assigned me to the garage as a backwater, it was really gossip central because it was where all those prisoners who were trusted to drive around the different areas of the reservation or even off reservation, went, and they'd all stop in and have a cup of coffee.

And then I discovered, oh, sometimes there were other things being cooked up. Where? The stove. What's going on here? Wait a minute. He's pulling things out of a refrigerator in the back. But they were

sort of semi-disarrayed. So that to the most casual person coming in, they might have merged into the pile of junk that they'd been artfully arrayed with. And there was once during my time — I was there for three and a half months — and there was once during that time that the guard in charge, who I think had some idea, he may not have known the full extent of it, but he certainly was aware that something was going on that he didn't want to know about, he didn't want to get in trouble about. And he told us all rather pointedly, that there was going to be an inspection on such and such a date, and he certainly didn't want to get in trouble, and we didn't want to get in trouble. So we should be especially careful and we make sure that we cleaned up our act. And, you know, these things were disarrayed back into a junk pile. They weren't thrown away. They were looking like they had been thrown away. And of course, once the inspection was over, they were put back in working order.

**Jeremy:** And what kinds of things, I mean, was this cooking, you know, was this pasta like Mama used to be? What were they making?

**Edward:** Well, he was an elderly Italian man.

**Jeremy:** So he was Italian. Okay.

**Edward:** Yes. All of the Italians in the prison said, well, if you're Italian, everybody assumes you're mafia. And the juries are all biased against you because you come in with an Italian name and accent and they think, ah, well, of course he must be mafia. I mean, they probably were, but you ask questions. This was before the internet, which made it ... Today, the internet makes it easy to find out what fellow prisoners are in for. I don't know. So, but it seemed pretty clear that he was part of a clique of people who sort of fit the profile, not just in being Italian, but other things. I think they were mafia. I don't know what he was in for, but he was cooking, you know, he would cook up little lunches and snacks for the people. It was more in the nature of a sort of little cafe for people who stopped in for a brief bite. And it was a little social centre, and he was doing a very good job of keeping this going as a social centre and a quasi-free space. But the food played obviously a key role in making people feel comfortable and at home and the very fact that there were these smells of food cooking and it made people feel freer to be social in the way that a good cafe does.

**Jeremy:** And the ingredients they were coming in with the garbage truck, they were coming in and you were pumping gas, but they were

bringing in, I don't know, whatever was needed. Were they taking orders or were they making do with what they could get?

**Edward:** Well, no, The way this would undoubtedly have worked ... You know, the phone calls were monitored so you wouldn't have been able to make a phone call, but the way things like that would have had to work is that somebody would have had a visitor, and they would have whispered to the visitor and made arrangements, and then the visitor — either themselves or would have paid somebody else in the area, or who could come to the area — would go and fill the shopping list and then would bring it and wrap it up. And probably things that had to be refrigerated would have to be frozen so that they'd keep for a period of time, and they'd leave this parcel in some agreed upon location at an agreed upon time and date where it could be picked up and money would change hands somewhere on the outside between the contacts. That was the way it would have to work. So, you know, anything that was coming in would have had to have been arranged sometime in advance. It wasn't an impromptu ...

And I didn't get involved. I didn't have any need or want. I wasn't asked to get involved. That wasn't my role. And, you know, one of the ways one gets along in prison is you don't meddle in other people's business. And gradually, as I came to be trusted by these guys, they would, you know, they saw that I could observe what was happening and wasn't raising any questions about it, and was happy to share if I was offered a free share in the food. And you know that I did my job diligently so that the guards weren't prompted to get out and come into the to the gas station office and see what was happening there. And they began to ask me for a little bit of help, but I never got involved in the actual incoming shipments.

**Jeremy:** And how about the outgoing shipments? I mean, were prisoners elsewhere who who weren't in the normal sort of run of things coming to the gas station, the motor pool, were prisoners elsewhere benefiting from this?

**Edward:** Well, yes, I mean something some ... Periodically there'd be a larger cooking that would be scheduled and somehow, again, through a process I didn't participate in, people would place orders who wanted to be part of the pool to get whatever it was, you know, it was a hot lunch, typically, of some sort. And then on the appointed day, if there was a group of people or an individual who actually had

access to a vehicle, they'd come by and pick up their share. But for others, we would ... we walked up, it was a couple hundred yards from from the the dormitory to this motor pool garage office, and we walked back and forth to work and to lunch. So we would, you know, stash some things under our coats or whatever and carry them back down to the dorm and deliver them to those who'd paid to be in on the deal. And eventually I was asked, because I was really skinny, and I'd been issued this really ill-fitting, grossly oversized overcoat that had a whole lot of room to stuff under the pockets, and it wouldn't look too outlandish, you know. So I was ... This is why I like to say that I was a garlic smuggler for the Mafia, which I was, but there's more to the story than that.

**Jeremy:** Considering you've made it very clear how important food was in the prison system, did you come away with any kind of life lessons about, yeah, about food and about how to get on in prison.

**Edward:** Well, I'm not sure about food. I mean, certainly a renewed sense of the importance of food. It's one of these things ... I go back to what I said earlier. When life gets stripped down to its essentials, food is one of the fundamentals. And it's not just for survival you know. People will riot over the food in a prison even when they're getting enough to eat, and it meets some minimal nutritional standards for adequacy. I think there's a basic human craving for that sensual and aesthetic pleasure of food. So — and again, I wasn't in a prison where there was any threat of violence. I wasn't being beaten — so on the other hand, you know ... Being deprived of much of that pleasure of food, even though I got, you know, a little glimpse as much as almost anybody because I was there, and if they wanted to keep me happy, they were going to give me a free share in whatever was being cooked up, which was very nice. And I got to hang out in the cafe and that formed a social circle. And I also got to know ... I mean, if there's a lesson about getting on in prison it's that everywhere there are human communities that don't rest on authority and coercion and that people form their own networks of mutual support. I mean, it was useful. I came to realise some other things happened and I realised that, well, the Mafia has my back, and that's not a bad thing in a prison. I didn't need protection particularly. Didn't need to call on that. But there are, there are bonds of trust that form. And in terms of both prison and food, you realise that it's a collaborative thing. You know, we're not very, very few people are

totally self-sufficient hunter gatherers these days. And it kind of heightens seeing the complicated construction of this infrastructure and this supply line, conscientised me to some of the ways that what we eat every day depends on equally complex, although mostly legal kinds of supply lines and chains and connections with a whole bunch of other people who are making it possible for us to have and to take the pleasure we take in the food that we eat every day.

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