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“Breaking Bread with a Spread” in a San Francisco County Jail



Above: A bowl of typical spread.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT GUMPERT © 2007

FINDING THEIR JAILHOUSE DIET BLAND, monotonous, and insubstantial, inmates in the California penal system invent alternative meals. “Spread,” the generic term for these creations, describes the inmate-created foods most often built around a single ingredient, instant ramen noodles.¹ Beginning with this noodle base, the inmates concoct variations that approximate their favorite foods on the outside, often those with distinctive flavorings and textures. Kermit Sanders, an inmate at San Francisco County Jail 5, or CJ5, as it is known for short,² describes the culture of spread:

I learned about spreads when I came to prison. Spread consists of institutional canteen commissary food items. Basically soups. Top Ramen noodles. And then from there you go to the other stuff: tuna, beef, chicken, tamales, herrings. And different things like that. You got

chili-bean spreads, you got tamale spreads, you got seafood spreads. My favorite is Going-Down-South Hog Spread.

You take pig skins. On the average, when I fix spread for just me and someone else, I would take two bags of pork skins, two bags of jalapeño pretzels, four beef sticks, and I would take a big bag of Cheese Crunchies. I would grind all that down with the Top Ramen, and I call that Down-South spread, 'cuz it's full of pork. I also like making spread with herring, also with tuna, oysters, with mayonnaise. Spread can be any food item, but the base of the spread is Top Ramen noodles. Most of the time we make spread because we don't want to eat what the institution is serving and it's a way of getting full at night.



Above: Giving thanks before eating spread.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT GUMPERT © 2007

The word *spread* can also be used as a verb, as photographer Robert Gumpert, who conducted the interviews for this article, observed. One prison deputy says he can even tell when the inmates begin to spread, because of the distinctive sound. “It’s usually towards the end of the night. You start hearing the pounding. It’s the Top Ramen. They’re crunching them up.”

The ingenious preparation of spreads usually involves the use of a microwave oven, although elsewhere in the county jail system, in older buildings with limited electricity, the inmates must use hot water to “cook” their spreads. Innovation has its bounds, though, since all ingredients for spread must be saved from the regular meal trays or ordered “on commissary.”³ Inmate Brennan Owens describes “spreading” as “putting something together to eat, too much of nothing, couple of Top Ramens, couple of bags of chips, couple of beef sticks. I pretty much crush everything together, throw it in one bag, a few cups of hot water, and blam. I got my Top Ramen special.” But other inmates assign spread a loftier status. Vanteak Alexander calls spread “the best thing going in the county—the things we buy off the canteen to satisfy the belly.” Trent “Mohammed” Prader claims that “not only is [spread] filling, but it’s like this is the premier meal of the day. It’s a top-of-the-line meal, like a filet mignon.” Patrick McConnell agrees, describing spread as “a delicacy. It’s like steak and lobster to the people.”

Alexander offers step-by-step instructions for making his Nacho Spread:

I got four or five bowls. Start off with your two Top Ramen noodles in a small bag. Put hot water in them, but don’t put too much. Mix them around until you get that nice feel, like it is smooth and the noodles cooked. Mix in a bag of hot chips (Hot Cheese Crunchies), adding more water if the cheese crunch sucks up some of the water. Keep this on the side. I don’t like beef jerky, but if you like it you can add it in at that moment.

Pour two packages of Jalapeño Cheese Squeezer (“squeeze cheese”) into a bowl, mix it with a cool amount of milk, enough so that it will spread, so you can spread it over your nachos. Rip open a package of chili beans and pour it into another bowl. Chop up a regular or hot pickle into small dice pieces.

You now have, in separate bowls, noodles, cheese, chili beans, and pickle. Throw the cheese and beans into the microwave and let them warm up to a nice, wonderful temperature, at least five minutes. Make sure you watch them in case they overboil. If they overboil, open the microwave door, mix them up, and warm them up about three more minutes. Take them out, run to whatever table you’re at. Lay down a flat bag. Put tortilla chips or Doritos down first. Pour the noodles with the hot chips over that, then the beans, but slowly, making sure there’s a rim of nacho chips around the spread. Once I got the beans down, I pour the pickles, ‘cause I got them slice and dice. I pour the pickles nice and rice over it, then I pour the cheese on top of that. Once I got the cheese on top of it then it’s cool, and that’s what I be calling my Nacho Spread.

Inmate Max Hackett has developed an Asian-style Sweet and Sour Spread. In the microwave he makes a glaze by heating a coffee cup full of three or four packets of apple jelly saved from breakfast, two packets of jalapeño hot sauce, a teaspoon or so of cherry fruit-drink mix, dried strawberries picked out from Quaker Oatmeal Strawberries & Cream, and sugar to taste. He pours the glaze over a bag of pork rinds and lets it soak in. He serves this spread with rice.

Hackett also does an Asian “stir fry” in the microwave by heating peanut oil he has extracted from his lunchtime peanut butter and then adding cooked ramen noodles, leftover vegetables, meat, and hot sauce. He describes this as “a hot peanut kind of Thai dish that is pretty unique,” adding that, as with his other creations, “you just have to use your imagination.”

After sixteen years in and out of jail, one Chinese inmate, who did not want his name used, has perfected his own Asian-style spread-making technique. It involves steaming rather than boiling ramen noodles. To make a sauce he heats mayonnaise to break the emulsion, and then mixes the oil with the soup base from the noodle package, along with some sugar or jelly “to get the sweet taste on it.” Sometimes, in a nod to fusion cooking, unwitting or otherwise, he wraps the mixture in tortillas or serves it on bread.

Inmate Joseph Watkins, a trained chef known as “Chef BamBam,”⁴ wrote up some other ethnic spread variations. According to his list, which includes the codes on the commissary order sheet, African-American inmates “tend to use the oysters (Code 4433) and clams (Code 4432), along with the Spanish rice (Code 4410) and the standard ramen/Cheetos/beef stick base to arrive at a jambalaya-esque creation,” while spreads made by Latinos “tend to have a combination of heat elements for a decidedly more spicy end result.” He notes, “If you intend to bring the heat and get your product the proper hue of ‘red spread red’ you must go the extra mile and use only Fire Hot Cheetos.”

In Watkins’s typology, “Blond Spreads” (a.k.a. “I Just Wanna Act As If Spreads”) are made by inmates unaffiliated with any of the various “clubs” that flourish on the inside.⁵ While inmates may make excuses like “I don’t want a red spread” or “I’m putting jelly in mine because I’m an individual,” Watkins believes that these inmates are looked upon by “ballers, shot callers, hustlers, and other repeat customers of the grey bar hotel [i.e., jail]” as a sign that they are “just not ready to eat at the big boys’ table yet.”

Sharing Spread

Although some inmates make “personal spreads” for themselves when they are alone in their cells, more often than

not spreading is a social activity. “It’s like we bonding in here when we break bread with a spread,” says Kermit Saunders. But sharing spread involves much more than a guest-host relationship. The basic principles of reciprocity operate in the making and eating of spread. These principles are applied publicly, since the microwave and tables where spread is prepared are located in the common area in each of CJ5’s sixteen “pods.”⁶ Brennan Owens typically spreads with a couple of other people who like to “put in.” He explains: “Everybody puts in the even, same amount, and everybody gets the even, same amount.” But Owens also shares with “brothers who been here, don’t have anything to eat. I’ll put a couple of spoonfuls on the bread for them so they can also enjoy my little special meal.”

The anonymous Chinese inmate will give out extra spread, even if those he shares it with haven’t given him supplies. He explains that “usually the people who share with me, I share with them,” but sometimes he simply doesn’t want to eat alone. Vanteak Alexander says he will “share with any individuals I relate to,” then broadens the statement to include “anybody that is hungry.” As he explains it, “God blessed me to be in a position where I can afford some spread, where I can afford these types of items off the canteen. So if a person’s hungry, if I know you ain’t got no canteen, just come to the table.”

Sharing spread is “a community thing,” notes inmate Devon Gray, but community is often racially defined. “In here the whites spread with the whites and the blacks spread with the blacks. It’s kind of like having a barbecue on the outside, but it’s not a barbecue. It’s a spread.”

Chef inmate Watkins says he spreads every night and likes to pass a little of his spread on to the leaders of whichever groups are operating “in the tank I’m in,” in order to show them “a little respect.” In his view, spreads are useful both as tokens of exchange and as indicators of jail status, “for if you and your contemporaries can spread together on a nightly basis, it shows that you have money enough on your books, as well as the strength in numbers, to eat what is the jailhouse equivalent to good food.”

The Economics of Spread

The amount of money that inmates are allowed to keep in their accounts is unlimited, but each inmate is restricted to a weekly commissary order of no more than fifty dollars. Some inmate accounts may be flush with drug-deal proceeds. Others may receive state disability checks and Social Security payments, although General Assistance (welfare) checks are intercepted and returned to the city. And then

there are the poor inmates—those with five dollars or less in their accounts—who are eligible to receive commissary “indigent packs” containing stationery, stamped envelopes, a pencil, a small stick of deodorant, and hard candy.

Money to spend on spread ingredients may also mean that an inmate is “being taken care of,” another marker of status. This caretaker may be a family member, girlfriend, or boyfriend on the outside who regularly deposits money into an inmate’s account. But “being taken care” isn’t always what it seems—it sometimes indicates that illicit exchanges are taking place. Eileen Hirst, chief of staff at the San Francisco County Sheriff’s Office, gives an example: “Inmate A releases money from his account to Girlfriend B, who then deposits it on account of Inmate C.” This sort of transaction prompts her office to investigate, since the exchanges may actually involve extortion or some other criminal activity.

Commissary prices are high, and many inmates complain about the markup, especially on the ramen noodles. Vanteak Alexander says, “Wow, you talking about eighty cents for the Top Ramen noodle? I used to get, what, sixteen of them for a dollar on the street. [At] Pak’n Save, you get a whole case for two dollar and some cents.”

The cost has prompted at least one inmate, Billy Cunningham, to forgo spread altogether, but for him, expense is not the only issue. Value is. “I have money on my books and I can buy a spread, but I just don’t believe in wasting my money on it.” Why, he asks, would he pay eighty cents for a soup that goes for twenty cents on the street?⁷

Spread versus the Institution

The value and significance of spread to inmates can be understood only within the larger contexts of confinement and the institutional diet. Inmate interviews suggest an oppositional, even dialectical, relation between official food and spread, as food served on the official trays during the day is transformed into spread later that evening. These oppositions play out in multiple dimensions, the temporal being the most obvious.

Mealtimes are rigid. Breakfast appears by 5:30 A.M. to leave plenty of time for inmates to be bussed to downtown courthouses. Lunch service begins at 9:30 A.M. Dinner is delivered to the pods by 4:00 P.M., which may explain why inmates say they are hungry at night, especially if they reject some or all of their meals. Spread, by contrast, is eaten on the inmates’ own timetable, with most spreading taking place around 8:00 P.M.

The meals themselves, which are contracted to the food service company Aramark, Inc., must conform to state-mandated requirements. At CJ5, Aramark trucks in ingredients three times a week; the company also supervises the inmates who work in the jail kitchen.⁸ Three times a day these workers wheel carts stacked high with food trays to each pod’s common area, where the inmates line up to receive them. Lunch arrives in plastic bags—four pieces of wheat bread, either a scoop of peanut butter or some lunchmeat in a smaller plastic bag, packs of mustard and salad dressing, three cookies, and a piece of fruit. Dinner is served in lidded trays designed to keep food warm.⁹ From the inmates’ point of view, their food comes from a largely invisible source.

Spread, on the other hand, reflects personal taste and individual access to resources. As such, it is an inmate’s product of choice, not under the control of any authority. And, of course, it is handcrafted, not mass-produced by an institution serving nearly eight hundred men.¹⁰ While a single inmate may make the spread, the process often involves complex social arrangements in terms of collective contributions and the final sharing. Spreading thus allows for some otherwise absent autonomy. In the words of the Chinese inmate, “Sometimes [with spread] we feel like we have something—the way we want to eat it, the way we want to cook it.”

The appearance of the institutional food offers another sharp contrast to spread. With the exception of fresh fruit and fruit juices, jail food is largely monochromatic, ranging from white (potatoes) to beige (oatmeal) to brown (meat). Even Aramark’s onsite manager admits that green vegetables are frequently dull in color from being overcooked. How much more appealing, then, are the spreads whose hues of yellow, red, and orange (the last, ironically, the same color as the standard-issue prison garb) are due to the frequent addition of Cheese Crunchies and Hot Cheetos!

Inmates and jail officials alike agree that “jail food sucks.” Tyrone McFall says that he and his fellow inmates call the official diet “s.o.s.—Same Old Shit. Here the s.o.s. be watery. Seems that here the ground beef, the lunchmeat that they serve us, they throw it into a blender and serve us like they serve the animals in the exotic cages. I’m not trying to put them down. Besides, this is a jail and they have the guidelines, they got their rules.” At CJ5, Melvin Badiola and Victor Henry riff on potatoes:

MB: It doesn’t seem like they are running out of potatoes. Every meal, there are potatoes. Breakfast...

VH: ...baked potatoes, sautéed potatoes, mashed potatoes...



Above: A nearly finished apple pie and its ingredients.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT GUMPERT © 2007

MB: ...potato soup...

VH: ...potato salad...

MB: ...every kind of potatoes. Everything is potatoes. Lunch? I'm surprised they're not serving potato sandwiches.

It's not that the authorities haven't noticed the blandness. The food lacks strong flavoring and other distinctions by design. To appeal to the widest possible population, spices are added sparingly; even salt is omitted because of some inmates' dietary restrictions. That's why so many of the commissary ingredients used in making spread involve some type of chili or jalapeño flavoring.

Joseph Watkins qualifies his blanket assertion that "jail food is jail food." "It is jail, but it is not a third-world jail," he says. "It's not Guantanamo Bay; it's not Abu Ghraib. Everything's clean. There are no bugs in it. The milk is cold; it's not expired. The juice is cold. The fruit is not rotten. The bread is not moldy." If the inmates detect spoiled food, it is immediately sent back to the kitchen, "with no argument," emphasizes Eileen Hirst, pointing out the obvious health implications.

The California penal system does accommodate ethnic tastes, religious restrictions, and health issues to varying degrees. San Francisco county jails serve numerous special-diet meals, including food prepared for inmates who are kosher, diabetic, or have food allergies or lactose intolerance; who require full liquid (for broken jaws) or soft foods only; who need pregnancy support, and so on. Even vegan

meals have been made available since the jailing of animals rights activists in the fur protests of the late 1990s.

The authorities also take care to acknowledge holidays with food. Hirst notes that Sheriff Michael Hennessey is adamant about providing county inmates with real turkey on Thanksgiving and real ham on Christmas. Early on in its contract with the county, Aramark was required to provide Hennessey with an actual tray of the holiday food served the inmates, so that he could verify that the meat was real, not "pressed turkey" or "turkey roll." As is true of the general population, during holidays inmates are more prone to depression, even suicide. As Eileen Hirst explains, "That fake turkey roll could be the thing that sends a person over the edge."

Nevertheless, Kermit Sanders and his friends still like to fix "a big ol' spread" on holidays or for someone's birthday, "replacing when we on the streets how we fix dinners like that."

Health and Hunger

While jail food is undeniably bland, it is nutritious, at least according to the standards followed by Title 15 regulations based on Section 6030 of the California Penal Code.¹¹ These regulations specify the number of daily servings of protein, dairy, vegetables, fruits, and grains.¹² No rules



Above: Showing off the finished apple pie.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT CUMPERT © 2007

govern spread makers, but some of them do seriously consider issues of nutrition.

“The diet of the average prisoner does not consist of vegetables,” says Watkins, who approaches spread making in part as a nutritional challenge. “Vegetables are considered ‘square,’ not ‘gangsta.’ I need the vegetables [in my spread] because I understand nutrition. I try to give it a more nutritionally balanced flavor, more density and more texture.”

Here is how Joseph Watkins makes his Nutritious Spread:

Collect all the coleslaw (from lunch). Raw cabbage and carrots, dressing seasoned with garlic and onion. Put it in a bowl, put two pats of margarine or butter, put them on top. Take orange juice (or apple juice), pour about two ounces over for the acidic content. Put it into the microwave for about six minutes, it sweats, it cooks down, it reduces in volume by two-thirds.

Cut bologna, saved from lunch, into small pieces and microwave it to the point where it fries up like little bacon bits. Tear up bread into small, bird-feeding pieces and let it dry out a little, so that it gets

crunchy, almost like croutons. Mix these ingredients together with a package of ramen noodles, minus the flavor packet. Add the cabbage mixture along with any other leftover cut-up meat (chicken patties, roast turkey, roast beef). Add water. Go a little long on the timing, to let the noodles blow up with the bread. The resulting spread should have the density and consistency of pâté. Wrap the spread in a sweat-shirt and leave it for 45 minutes.

Watkins’s suggestions for serving spread are complex and depend on “where you are in the pecking order and where you’re at in the commissary. If you are with one of the bigger or more established inmates—say, a boss of a crew—you’d serve it on tortillas.” Ideally, these tortillas would be heated in the microwave to make burritos with pepper jack cheese or refried beans. Alternatively, some people save their potatoes from breakfast “to add a starch density.” Other people just eat spread out of a bowl, with bread.

Despite the (arguably) adequate number of calories provided, inmates consistently speak of being hungry on the official jail diet. Watkins, who is about six feet eight inches tall and 350 pounds, says, “The portions are too small. I don’t know if that’s to keep the inmates from getting too strong. It’s nutritionally balanced, but it’s just too small.”

Interviews with other inmates suggest that the problem lies less in the quantity of jail food offered than in the fact that the food is often left uneaten. With this in mind, Brennan Owens emphasizes spread’s basic function: “For any of those who eat with Top Ramen, this is not some kind of fantastic meal, just something to get me through the night, keep me on a full stomach. It’s easier to sleep on a full stomach.” Tei Mati agrees: “Everyone gets full off of spread.”

Sometimes too full, believes Kermit Sanders, who has observed that if you eat spreads, “They’ll put the fat on you. If you are not working out and you eat spreads, you will gain weight.” That may be especially true if you eat the desserts that often follow spreads. And who can resist? “Mind you, you can’t have dinner without dessert,” says Devon Gray.

Some inmates make apple, peach, or apricot cobbler from the fruits served on their trays. Others use fruit, crushed cookies, milk, butter, Kool-Aid, jelly, and other sweet items to make elaborate “cakes,” “pies,” and “puddings.” A few inmates even make candies. Gray, for example, makes a version of gummy bears by taking packets of jelly, mixing them with sugar, and then microwaving the mixture “until it turns into a really thick gelatin” that can be rolled into little balls from which he shapes animals. Some inmates add Jolly Ranchers candies for additional flavor.

Some of the most sought-after spreads in C15 are the pies and cakes made by Max Hackett, the creator of the Sweet and Sour Spread. Like a small number of other highly skilled spread makers, Hackett, known as “The Pie Guy,” has attained legendary status. He attributes the genesis of his art to the inevitable reality of doing time: “I had all the time in the world in my cell. [I was] bored, bored, bored, and beat myself up. One day, I took these ingredients. By the end of the night I had this pie made and every inmate coming to my cell, demanding that I create something for them.”

Now other inmates give Hackett ingredients from their trays—a slab of peanut butter, the apple jellies they get with their peanut butter, or pieces of fruit. Even the deputies like his pies. “I’ve had many guards take pictures with a camera phone and e-mail their wives: ‘Look what this guy is doing in here!’” says Hackett. “And they’d message back, ‘How does he do that?’”

Like other inmates, Hackett transforms simple items into multipurpose tools. For mixing, measuring, rolling,

and cutting bread rounds he uses a plastic coffee cup, while a plastic spoon with its bowl turned inside out—requiring skill and practice—functions as a knife for cutting, peeling apples, shaving chocolate, and spreading icing. With no tins for his pies, Hackett uses plastic-covered magazines as a base. Here is his recipe for Pie Guy Pie:

Make some icing using peanut butter, hot chocolate mix from the commissary, together with some shaved chocolate and other sweeteners. You could add some coffee to make peanut butter mocha icing. Take some county “Oreo” cookies, the jailhouse cookies, and cut the shortening cream filling out. Mix that together with some Cream of Wheat cereal and maybe some vanilla caramel drops, to create a really neat creamy-textured pie filling. Take a piece of fruit such as an apple, then peel it, dice it up, and caramelize it using butter and sugar to make a fruit filling.

Turn a coffee mug upside down, take a slice of bread, cut out a circle, and then roll it out with the coffee cup to make a circle of dough. Typically it takes seven to eight rings of dough to make the whole circumference of the bottom of the cake. Take crusts from those slices of bread, and with the icing glue rings around the outer circumference of the cake, creating each level. For each level, put some pie filling in, until you’ve reached about five or six layers, then top it off with a fudge brownie ring. On the inner circle of the brownie ring, take Oreo cookies and do a nice little decorative, turning the cookies vertical and inserting them all the way around the cake. Put the caramelized apple pie filling on top, filling in the middle. Using the corner of the spoon on a Kit Kat or Hershey bar, shave some chocolate on top of that. Crumb the side with some crushed oatmeal cookies.¹³

It is, of course, the fact of their confinement that makes food so important to the inmates. Eileen Hirst compares the jail situation to an eleven-hour airplane flight, when passengers look forward to food, no matter how bad it is. Indeed, inmates often refer to the food they eat outside as “real food,” thereby suggesting that official meals and spreads are something else—something less. Yet, after learning how to make spread in jail, some inmates take the practice with them after release.

When asked if he has eaten spread on the outside, Tyrone McFall answers, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I sure do. I get a beef stick or maybe a hot link. I throw it in the microwave, slice it up, and throw it in the bowl noodles. I get some cracklin’ skins. I get some cheese and crackers. I throw that in, shake that thing up, and I let that thing marinate, and after that thing marinate, that thing be ready to go.”

Sean Cooper says he once made spread for his two daughters while their mother was at work. When they saw it, he recalls, “They go ‘What the heck is that?’ I said, ‘That’s

dinner.’ They go, ‘Ewwww.’” But they ate all of it and now ask for spread, choosing the ingredients they like.

When he is on the outside, Kermit Sanders says he likes to “get really fancy with spreads,” experimenting with additions of onion, garlic, bell pepper, cream of mushroom soup, or Campbell’s clam chowder. His “old lady” has started fixing spreads too. Nevertheless, in the opinion of Brennan Owens, spread is not “something you’d put in a gourmet book. You wouldn’t make it for a friend-reunion type spread. [It’s] something for the jailhouse.” Devon Gray disagrees. When released, he says, he might “get a studio apartment [so I] can make cuisine for the whole building. I want to make a cookbook of the different spreads, and the different candies and cakes and pies.” In his view, “people out there just don’t know just how intelligent and ingenious [we] are in here, on top of all the artistry.”

Max Hackett’s creativity with spread has helped him in his struggle with addiction. Making spread enables him to “focus on good qualities” and to “bring myself as much out of jail as possible.” Cooking and eating his own creations allows him, if only momentarily, an imaginary escape. He tells his “crew” (the group of inmates he hangs out with and with whom he cooks): “We’re going to Tulan tonight [Hackett’s favorite Vietnamese restaurant, on Sixth Street in San Francisco] and we’re going to Starbucks afterwards, have a caramel Frappuccino.”

In jail terms this means Max Hackett’s Asian stir fry, followed by coffee with melted caramel candies—an inventive re-creation of all that jail denies these men. ☉

NOTES

1. After seeing people waiting in line for hot noodles on a cold night, food inventor Momofuku Ando perfected the instant noodle in 1958. His company, Nissin Foods, first marketed Cup Noodles in 1971. Aggregate servings of this signature brand reached 25 billion worldwide in 2006. Ando died in 2007 at the age of ninety-six. See “Appreciations: Mr. Noodle,” *New York Times*, 9 January 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/01/09/opinion/09tue3.html.

2. The jail is located on a county-owned ranch in the town of San Bruno, south of the San Francisco International Airport. All of the inmates at CJ5 are male. In April 2005 the male prison population for all of San Francisco County was 52 percent black, 24 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian, and 4 percent “other.” About three-quarters of the CJ5 inmates are pre-trial felons; the rest are serving misdemeanor sentences for felony convictions. This time is served as “county time,” a sentencing decision made at the judge’s discretion.

3. Commissary or “canteen” provides inmates with a weekly opportunity to order snacks and personal items, such as shower shoes and reading glasses, with money drawn from their trust accounts.

4. See www.chefbambam.com.

5. “Clubs” is jailpeak for “gangs.”

6. San Francisco County Jail 5 opened on August 19, 2006, replacing the old County Jail 3. The architects designed CJ5 as a version of the panopticon, an eighteenth-century prison building designed by British jurist, philosopher, and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, who theorized that inmates would self-regulate their behavior if they knew that their jailers could watch them at all times and in all places.

CJ5 contains sixteen “pods.” In each, a deputy’s podium with a panel controlling doors and communication is situated so that one deputy has clear sightlines to all spaces, including cells, used by the forty-eight inmates in that pod. The common area in front of the deputy’s desk contains round stainless-steel tables, with attached stools bolted to the floor. A stainless-steel sink stands against one wall. A microwave oven is located either near the sink or on a long table against the opposite wall.

7. As is the case with other exclusive county jail concessions (such as the telephone service provider), Canteen Correctional Services, which operates the commissary, pays an annual commission of at least four hundred thousand dollars to the city. This commission goes to the Inmate Welfare Fund, established by California state law to pay for inmate programs, including the “indigent packs.”

8. According to Eileen Hirst, Aramark, Inc., is one of only two food-service corporations large enough to supply the jails. Interestingly, Aramark also has contracts with San Francisco’s AT&T Ballpark (home of the San Francisco Giants), the Bankers’ Club, and the exclusive Top o’ the Mark at the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill. Interview with Chief of Staff Eileen Hirst at the San Francisco Sheriff’s Office, 16 October 2007.

9. The design of the trays also thwarts their potential use as weapons. They are plastic rather than metal and have rounded corners.

10. In fact, two thousand inmates throughout the county jail system are served by CJ5’s central kitchen.

11. According to Title 15 regulations, “minimum” inmate diets must be based upon the “nutritional and caloric requirements found in the 1999–2002 Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) of the Food and Nutrition Board; Institute of Medicine of the National Academies; the 1990 California Daily Food Guide; and the 2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.” See Title 15 Regulations, p.47, at www.cdcr.ca.gov/Divisions_Boards/csa/fsoRegulations.html.

Although Title 15’s section on food provides details of portion size and macro- and micronutrient levels, it only suggests appropriate caloric intake levels, based on gender, age, Body Mass Index, and degree of activity. The daily recommended caloric allotment for a thirty-year-old male ranges from 2,635 calories (sedentary) to 3,235 (active). Rebecca Craig, a field representative for the California Standards Authority that implements Title 15, said that the dietary regulations are a “work in progress,” given ever-changing nutritional research findings. Phone interview, 18 October 2007.

12. Inmates must be offered four to five daily servings of fruits and vegetables. Total dietary fat must be limited to 30 percent of the total weekly calories. Aramark’s contract with the county sets a level of 3,000 calories per day for males, which falls mid-range in the specifications of Title 15’s standards for correctional facilities. Information from “Agreement between the City and County of San Francisco and Aramark Correctional Services, Inc.”

13. Vantek Alexander makes a different apple pie, as follows:

chocolate chip or oatmeal cookies
milk
apples, both diced and sliced
Kool-Aid powder (any flavor)
packets of apply jelly
pats of butter
cream filling from the insides of Oreos or other cream cookies

Create a dough out of crushed cookies and milk. Add small chunks of diced apples. Put this mixture into a one-serving bowl and cover it with a mixture of clear apple jelly, butter, and Kool-Aid powder. Add another layer of sliced apples, then a layer of dough, more Kool-Aid powder, and a final layer of dough to fill the bowl. Finish the top with Kool-Aid powder and jelly.

Cook the mixture in the microwave for three minutes, pull it out, and swirl around the jelly/Kool-Aid topping to cover evenly. Put the bowl back in the microwave for a minute. If it “looks brownish” and smells good, it’s done. Let it cool. Lay out a potato chip bag and knock on the underside of the bowl to release the pie upside down onto the bag. If you have a “sticking problem,” smear some butter around the edge and put it back into the microwave for a few seconds to melt the butter. Gently knock the pie to release it. Put plastic bags on your hands and “butter it up” all around. Make little balls of the cookie cream filling and stick them around your pie. Put it into the microwave again for about 30 seconds to melt the cream, and then spread it all around.