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"FOOD
FOR
Thought"

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Lying on an uncomfortable, two-inch vinyl mattress, in a stifling Prison cell, I was at peace for the first time in a long time. Eyes closed, my mind was centered on one thought: what can I use for an ersatz flour to make dough? (Pastelios were in my immediate future.) I was finally away from the stress and madness of prison and safely locked away in my thoughts of food.

Cooking is a way for me to both relieve stress and express myself. One of the few pleasures I can still get out of life is to cook a dish, then share it with people. It's heartening to hear how much they've enjoyed something that I've created using my hands mind and heart.

Currently I am doing time behind the walls of a Maximum facility Prison, so as you can imagine, pleasure is rarely found in here, but when

I am either by myself thinking up new dishes⁽²⁾ or actually putting them together in my cell, I go to a much safer, happier place than my reality usually allows.

My memories of cooking go back to when I was a child. My family and I used to go to my grandmother's house at least once a week for dinner. I would stay in the kitchen - when she made something I really liked - cutting here, stirring there. When my Aunt Milagros would visit from Florida, my brother and I would really be put to work. These two ladies are the sweetest, funniest Puerto Rican women you could imagine. My Aunt's accent was so thick I had a hard time understanding her as a child & my grandmother was always in such a good mood when my Aunt was visiting, we would all get together and cook. Assuredly, when my Aunt

would go back to Florida, we would have a freezer ³ full of Pastelles, Puerto Rican style Tamallies.

My brother and I would be given the job of grating hundreds of green bananas into a paste like dough. My grandmother did not waste any food, so if either of us tried to throw away the last quarter of the banana because we were scared of grating our fingers, she would say, "there's plenty more left, you two better use all of that!" We would have to grate them all the way down to our finger tips. The four of us would be at the table for hours, working, laughing & eating together. My grandmother's kitchen was filled with all sorts of Bric-A-Brack, pictures and flowers. Her counter tops were red, which matched her brick patterned linoleum tiled floor. She usually had a plastic sheet

covering a red and white table cloth, but what I⁽⁴⁾ most vividly remember of my grandmother's kitchen were the aromas. The smells of garlic & onion sautéing in olive oil, pork slowly roasting in the oven & my favorite smell of all, pastelios frying away on the stove. The little pockets of dough filled with heaven itself, smelled utterly divine. Your nostrils would flare & your stomach immediately grumble in anticipation of these little Puerto-Rican treasures. Those Pastelios were my real reward after a hard day of banana gratting.

While my brother & I would be busily working away at the gratting, my grandmother & my Aunt would be at the stove making the filling for both the pastelles & the pastelios. This consisted of a combination of pork, onions, garlic, peppers, tomato sauce & various seasonings.

To construct the pastelles, you get a bananya leaf - you can also use wax paper - and lay down the bananya dough. Next you put some of the pork filling in the center and cover with some more of the dough, enclosing the filling in between the dough like a sandwich. Fold in the ends of the bananya leaf & wrap it up nice and tight. Once you have two of the pastelles done like this, you stack one on top of the other & using twine, bind the two of them together. All ~~that~~ that is left to do now is to boil them & enjoy.

once all of the dough was used up, there was always a pot of the filling left over. While we cleaned up, grandma would make dough using flour & water, roll it out on the counter to about a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick, then place the meat filling on the dough & begin to form patties, or Pastelios.

which she would immediately begin to fry. The pastellos only took about 30-45 seconds per side. Just remembering the smell of dough frying in oil, the sizzling, popping sound it made has my mouth watering! She kept a plate next to the stove with paper towels on it to stack them on as they came out of the hot oil. As fast as she made them, we ate them, never giving her a chance to stack them up. She would try to chase us away, but with no success.

Lately, with the way stuff has been going on inside here, I needed to re-capture a little piece of my childhood. In here, we all need to journey back every now and then. Can you really fault me for this nostalgia? Where you're from, do people get cut for playing handball on the wrong court? Do they hang themselves because

a girlfriend didn't come over? And then there's the cops. Constantly harassing people just to amuse themselves & pass the time. They act like adolescents, like the cretins in high school chasing the scrawny kid down the hall to give him the forever dreaded wedgie. When too much negativity starts to surround me, I try to counter it with something positive. I will either call or write home to speak with my loved ones writing my thoughts down on paper, reading a good book, or my favorite past time, cooking.

As simple as any of these things sound, everything that I do in prison is ten times more difficult than if I were doing it in the comfort of my own home. In order to make a phone call, I have to have my phone numbers approved by the administration, & then placed on my allowed calling list.

Phone calls can only be made ~~by way of~~ collect, so if ~~my~~ ^{the} phone does not accept collect calls, (say, if it's ~~only had~~ a cell phone) then I can't call. If I am fortunate enough however to be able to call home, then I am only permitted to do so at designated times, such as in the yard when I am allowed out for recreation, or on my gallery every other night for ten, very strict minutes.

To read, if I do not have books in my cell, I can either wait to be put on a call-out for the prison library, or I can borrow one from some one I know, but then my choices are limited. If by chance I am locked in my cell, & they are some cells away from me, I can "fish" them (fishing is taking a line - usually a sheet ripped into long strips & fastened together - then anchor

with some kind of weight & thrown from one ⁹ cell to the other, usually with the help of some convicts in between - until it reaches the intended destination.) The recipient will then tie whatever item it may be to the end of the "fishing line", which is then pulled back to the cell. If an officer happens to walk while this is going on, usually they will confiscate the item(s) & line, leaving the convict ^{to} have to ~~proceed to~~ destroy yet another sheet, and make more line. The other convict however, will lose whatever it was he was trying to pass.

Cooking is also a challenge. Prison has a canteen (more commonly known as commissary) where we are allowed to purchase items such as tobacco, toiletries, stationery & food, provided we have money in our accounts. We can either earn

money through various Prison jobs (which average \$2.22 an hour) or it can be sent to us by family & friends on the outside. Commissary runs on a two-week rotation. If the commissary is out of a particular item when your turn comes around, you either wait another two weeks, or try to make a deal with someone to pick it up for you when they go.

Once you have all of the items needed to cook, there are two main methods to cook. You can use a plastic hot pot, (purchased through commissary) or remove the metal coil from that hot pot, discard of the remains, and get a hold of a large restaurant-sized tuna can. This can can be obtained from someone working in the prison kitchen. Then, through a series of convicts, you have the can smuggled out of the kitchen, through the facility & delivered to your cell for a couple packs of cigarettes or stamps, the coin of the realm.

whenever I cook - usually because whatever the state is providing that day is basically inedible - it takes place in the same 6'x9' box that also has my bed, sink & toilet. So, the same place I use to cook, I will also use to eat, wash my dishes, use the toilet once the food finishes its course, and then sleep once i'm so stuffed I can no longer move.

Using my bed as a table, I set up my make shift stove: A metal coil perched atop an emptied can of beans, & my tuna can used in place of a frying pan, (a far cry from my grandmother's GE Stove & non-stick frying pans). when it comes to frying, there are certain ingredients needed such as oil & flour, which those housed in general population (such as myself)

are not allowed to buy in commissary. (12)

These specific items are only available to those confined in the honor block section of the prison; they have not been in trouble for some time, so they have earned certain privileges that the rest of us are not entitled to. When someone in general population (G.P.) wants to obtain these items, it is much like getting the fun~~at~~ Con. locate someone with access to these items, make some kind of deal for them, then using those same channels, have them brought to your cell.

This is usually how I get my flour & oil, but the last person I had bringing me my stuff~~*~~ was stopped, pat-frisked & my merchandise was confiscated - which undoubtedly was sold to someone else by that officer - and I was left with nothing but a pissed off transporter.

To avoid a repeat of this fiasco, I decided to come up with a substitute flour for the dough. The oil was easy because I can purchase butter, which once melted down can be used to fry. The flour though was a different story. This took more creative thinking on my part. So as I laid there in my hot, stifling cell, I came up with an idea. Using items I had stored in the plastic bin under my bed, I took a box of Macaroni & Cheese, emptied the noodles into a bowl & filled it with cold water. I let the pasta soak for around half an hour, checking every ten minutes, until I got my desired texture (think play-~~doh~~^{doh}). Then I drained the water and grabbed fist-fulls of pasta, squeezing them through my fingers by opening & closing my hand - as you would make a fist - until I had

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a mound of wet-doughy pasta. But the dough was too sticky. I took some Cheez-it crackers, and placed them inside of an empty potato chip bag, with an un-opened can of beans, I crushed the crackers into dust. I slowly incorporated it into the dough. This made the dough more pliable. (and added a hint of Cheese flavor to the dough.) Now, with the dough complete, the work began.

I made the filling for my Pastelitos using all of the necessary ingredients with one change. Instead of pork, I used chicken. Once that was all done, I cleared an area on the floor & laid out a large plastic garbage bag. I placed the dough in the middle &, using a tightly rolled up magazine wrapped in plastic wrap, I rolled the dough out until it was about the thickness of pre crust. Using a small bowl as a cookie

cutter, I cut out several circles of dough. Then, I placed a little pile of the filling in the middle, folded it over until the two ends met, & sealed them using a plastic fork, ~~meshing~~ meshing the two ends together. Once I had them all assembled, I melted down a stick of butter inside of the tuna can to use as a thick oil - as you can imagine, not the healthiest way to cook - and began to re-capture my child hood. Because of all the obstacles that stood in my way; the jerry-rigged kitchen I had to use & the limited space I had - the whole process took me about six hours. But for those six hours, I was in complete & utter serenity. When I'm like this, nothing can bother me - provided I don't have a random cell search during this process & have my can & coil confiscated, earning me a mis-behavior report (or ticket).

As you can see, doing something as simple as using a phone, cooking or even reading a book - things that when I was home, I never gave a second thought about - can become problematic & tiresome, which requires ingenuity & creative thinking to accomplish. The next time you find yourself at your stove, in your big kitchen with counters, a table, utensils & a refrigerator, try to picture me in a space probably no bigger than your walk in closet, & a bed taking up almost half of that space; cooking out of a tuna can. Every time I cook, I picture myself at my grandmother's house, remembering the good times that I took for granted.