

Prison Cheesecake by Wayne Snitzky

The moment Jay started adding lemon juice to the bowl would have been the perfect time to look in his cell. My friend and I probably looked like little kids playing with their first chemistry set. Four eyes peaking over the lip of a plastic bowl. Two tongues slightly protruding as the tiny plastic lemon gives us it's prize. After juice is added, Jay stirs the mixture. Squeeze more juice. Stir. Squeeze. Stir. We were aiming for a mixture that was "stiff" but that could mean anything. Piper Kerman's cheesecake recipe from her book *Orange Is The New Black* wasn't a proper recipe. It included her experience of learning from "Yvette's Spanish-and-hand-gesture" instructions. Without that, I would just be guessing what a "stiff mixture" meant. I was relying on Jay's years of prison culinary expertise.

Jay posses Michelin-star level skills, all with crappy commissary items. He perfected a recipe for Beef Wellington that I am sworn to secrecy about. All I can share is that the dough is made from crushed potato chips and the filling starts with a pouch of roast beef with the gravy rinsed off. Experiment on your own from there. He also invented a crispy pizza crust made from flour tortillas. Many have tried to replicate it. All have failed. Jay promised to teach me his method before he goes home. Six more years and it's all mine.

Our little cheesecake project was being undertaken in the hopes of presenting Piper herself with a slice of cake inspired by her book. I knew the date she would be coming to our prison. I was organizing another TEDxMarionCorrectional event and one of the contacts we made at an earlier event, Delia, went to the same college Piper had attended. They weren't BFF's but the college connection was enough to try and facey space, twitter page her to extend a speaking invite. When I found out the plan worked, I shared the news with Jay and he suggested we try out Piper's recipe and share a slice with her at the event.

Jay and I were already set to speak at the event. I was going to talk about

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the things, physical and emotional, you take into prison with you, and the things you take out with you. Jay was going to talk about how much he missed riding his BMX while serving time. He used to ride professionally and his speech was part attempt to allow the prison administration to allow him to set up a ramp to practice tricks for a future event. It was really about all the things we live without in prison and how we can keep our skills sharp for when we are released. Plus, as one of the curators of the event I wanted the sight of a short, chubby guy with long hair and a longer beard talking about riding his BMX. It would provide a little comic relief.

When we decided to try her recipe, our first task was to try and find a copy of her book. Jay and I had our own version of a book club. Since we only ever had one copy of a book, the discussions often happened well after one of us had read the book first. Jay tended to knock out the half of a book, then get around to the end eventually. I was the opposite, which is probably one of the reasons we were such good friends. I'd start off knocking back a chapter here and there, but as soon as I got anywhere near the back half of a book, I had to finish it. Our book club books always got passed on. With a little luck I tracked down our old copy of Piper's book.

I flipped through the pages until I found the recipe on page 150. Jason looked over my shoulder as we read what items we would need: graham crackers, four pats of margerine, a tub of Laughing Cow cheese, vanilla pudding, Cremora and lemon juice. That would take us a few days to gather. We didn't have access to the same items Piper did in Danbury Correctional Institution's commissary. Our prison had the graham crackers, cremora and lemon juice. The margerine was easily appropriated from the chow hall. Laughing Cow cheese was the problem. We had some sort of cheese-spread product. Since this was cheesecake, I assumed the cheese we used would be kind of important. Luckily, Jay had recently

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ordered a food box and fate somehow told him to get a tub of Laughing Cow Old Fashioned Cream Cheese. It would have to do. The last item, vanilla pudding, would have to be smuggled from the vending machines in the visiting room. Not impossible for two guys with a combined several decades of experience behind bars.

It took us a few days to gather everything we needed. We got together, reread the instructions and got to work. Start with the crust. I crushed graham crackers and Jay added the margerine and mixed. We baked/microwaved the mix in a Tupperware bowl for about a minute, per Piper's instructions, then allowed it to cool and harden. Then we dumped the cheese in a bowl and mashed it with a fork and followed that by the pudding getting mixed in till smooth. Next up was the creamer. Piper said this step might seem gross, but the mixture looked velvety delicious to me. The instructions here said to beat viciously until smooth. It stayed a bit lumpy. Jay and I took turns whipping the crap out of the bowl until sweat formed on brows. We decided there was no way Piper and the ladies of Danbury could have beaten their mixture more than we did, so we moved on. We added the lemon juice, mixing and waiting for it to stiffen. We used nearly the whole bottle, just like Piper told us, and it still did not stiffen. Maybe our "stiffen" was not her "stiffen." The mixture was poured onto the crust and set on ice to chill.

After about a four hour wait, the filling looked set so Jay and I decided it was pie eating time. In honor of our favorite cartoon character, Homer Simpson and his special chili eating boots, we donned our special pie eating caps. Which were just the same ball caps we wore all the time. Then we gathered our special pie eating plates. Which were just the same tupperware bowl lids we ate everything off of. And grabbed our special pie eating utensils. Which were just the same plasticware we ate everything with. Finally, the moment was on us. His hand trembling with excitement, Jay plunged a flimsy, near toothless-from-overuse,

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plastic knife into the center. He made one cut to the edge. It was a nice clean cut. Nothing sticking to the knife. The filling was not collapsing back in on itself. All good signs.

Jay made three more cuts and switched to a fork and wiggled it in between the bowl and the crust to dig out our slices. He lifted the first slice slowly, and held it aloft for inspection. The filling was firm and had a consistent color. Apparently it was "beat viciously" and "smooth" and "firm" enough. The crust wasn't crumbling, which means we had used the right amount of butter and warmed it just the right amount. A quick sniff and we were rewarded with the unmistakable aroma any master baker would know, a perfect cheesecake. Waiting for that first bite, my heart and salivary glands raced in anticipation. After all the work, and rule bending to get a handful of ingredients, it was finally time.

The first slice went on Jay's plate. He dug out the second slice for me. By unspoken agreement we would taste our creation together. Our movement's became synchronized. We grabbed our plates and picked up our forks. We plunged through the filling and crust, then slowly, shakily, lifted Piper's world famous prison cheesecake to our already smiling lips. The fork comes forward and our teeth clamp down. Cheesecake, glorious cheesecake finally hitting taste buds! But wait. It's not glorious. It's actually kind of gross. Really frigging gross! I can't even chew it. My bite just sits on my tongue, stubbornly refusing to taste like cheesecake. My first full thought was "There's no way this is supposed to taste like this."

I look over at Jay and he isn't chewing either. His face is screwed up in that universal face everyone makes when they eat something super bitter. Did my face look like that?

I psyched myself up. "You can do this. You eat gross prison food all the time. Maybe it's just an aquired taste. Chew." But each tentative movement of my jaw

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brought a fresh wave of spoiled lemon jello mayonnaise exploding in my mouth. I stop trying to chew. I look over at Jay and he says to me around the food in his mouth "Whah dah fuh?" My bite ended up in a paper towel. So did Jay's bite. Something had gone horribly wrong.

The balled up paper towels were still in the air on their way to the trash can when the argument about what went wrong started. The obvious answer, switching from Laughing Cow cheese to Laughing Cow Old Fashioned Cream Cheese was dismissed by both of us right away. How can cream cheese spread be turned into gross spoiled lemon mayonnaise? Jay believes it was the lemon juice. He was never sold on the whole idea of using it to begin with. His theory sort of makes sense, considering the horrid lemon-ey result. But I am not convinced. I personally believe that the Keefe brand coffee creamer was the culprit. Piper's recipe specifically called for Cremora, a name brand. Keefe coffee creamer tasted like it is made from recycled styrofoam. Cooking is chemistry and there is no way our creamer had the same chemical reaction that Piper's creamer did. But who knows? Maybe her vanilla pudding was actually powder pudding mix pilfered from her chow hall, not our vanilla pudding cup pilfered from the vending machines in the visiting room. Or, maybe it was the fact Piper's recipe was more of a guide since it had zero amounts to go with ~~the~~ those ingredients. Or it might just be the contaminated Ohio prison water. We may never know the answer.

Normally, Chef Jay would work a recipe until it was perfect. Our newly created Prison Mayonnaise Pie was such an epic failure that neither one of us wanted to risk throwing away that many ingredients again. At one point I thought of sending the recipe and our results to PBS's America's Test Kitchen to see if they could figure it out. Instead, Jay and I decided to just let Piper and the ladies of Danbury keep their recipe. Piper would have to give her TEDx speech without the aid of a slice of her old cheesecake.