

## Education, a Recipe for Success

"You gotta take a vocation class if you ever wanna get out of here." This is the statement I've heard time and time again since I have been incarcerated. My reply was always, "Why?" I've worked as an executive at large corporations, owned my own businesses, and was even a licensed electrician before I was locked up. "I Got This!"

Then reality set in. There isn't going to be much call for an old(er) ex-con with a felony record in the workplace. There *are* opportunities out there, but I was going to have to retool my skill set in order to take advantage of them.

I looked at the list of vocational classes available and talked to an education counselor. "What do you like to do?" she asked. "Play music and eat," was my response and since music wasn't an option, food was it. I'd always considered myself a pretty good cook in the world. I had my signature dishes I made when I wanted to impress a date, and I could grill just about ANYTHING to perfection, in my opinion. But I was never properly trained in the hows and whys of good cooking. So I signed up for an Intro to Culinary class and thought to myself, "Well, at least I'll eat good." Little did I know just how much of an understatement that would be.

The first thing I learned was cooking is really Applied Science. Being the Science Nerd I am, this certainly appealed to me. There's a reason why the recipe says to bring the ingredients to a boil – to accelerate the chemical reaction. Cooking also involves more than just taste. Smell, sight, hearing, and touch are all integral parts of the eating experience. The sound of fajitas sizzling on a hot plate, the sight of a juicy steak when you cut into it, the feel of chips and fresh veggies as they crunch in your mouth; these are all just as important as taste. And olfaction, the sense of smell, can have even more of an impact. Anyone who has survived COVID and temporarily lost their ability to smell can attest to that fact. Airborne molecules reach the olfactory bulb in your nasal cavity and are transmitted directly to the deepest part of the brain via the olfactory nerve. That's how a single smell can trigger memories of a specific place and time in your past.

Gustation, the sense of taste, results from the stimulation of small bumps of the tongue called papillae, better known as taste buds. Most people are born with about 10,000 taste buds located throughout the mouth and throat. These taste receptors detect sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami (the protein called glutamate that gives foods like aged cheeses and meats their meaty taste). A cool thing I learned about taste buds is that they are constantly replacing themselves – about every ten days. That's why when you burn your tongue it isn't permanent.

Our instructor Mr. S [REDACTED] made sure we understood the science behind preparing, assembling, and presenting a well-cooked meal. He ought to know. He's been cooking from scratch since he was six years old when he developed a palate for eating something and then figuring out how to make it. In addition to his catering business, he also cooks for two professional teams in Chuck wagon and BBQ competitions, using authentic equipment like iron skillets and Dutch ovens to prepare meals over an open fire. He also has a garage full of championship trophies to show for it. [REDACTED]



[REDACTED] Yeah, this guy knows how to cook! I asked him what his favorite dish to cook is, and his reply was brisket. He cooked 350 in one year before COVID. His favorite dish to eat? Mexican Food. Fav food group? BUTTER! And when I asked why he started cooking? "I was hungry, Dude!"

His answers capture the spirit of our class. He keeps it fun and interesting while also being informative. Best of all, he lets us do the cooking. And if we get the dish a little wrong – it's OK. "That's how you learn sometimes, by screwing up. And next time – you do it better." A lesson for LIFE as well. My favorite part of our class is, when we're done cooking, we eat it. And BOY do we eat some good stuff!

On my 3<sup>rd</sup> day in the class we made Chicken Fried Steak with homemade gravy, garlic potatoes that melt in your mouth, fresh baked sour dough rolls, and a tossed salad with a raspberry vinaigrette dressing. OMG was it good! We've made several dishes since then, some complex, but many with simple steps and ingredients that taste amazing when prepared in the correct proportions. Last week was the best. We made Calzones. If you have never had one of these magical treats – think of a supreme pizza folded over on itself with the edges pinched close to form a Hot Pocket about the size of a pee wee football, but SO MUCH better tasting.

We made everything from scratch – the dough, tomato sauce, even the ranch dressing for the spinach salad – and all of it was made by hand with the freshest ingredients. Did you know authentic tomato sauce is made with carrots? I did, but only because I remember my Italian grandmother making it when I was very young. You start with diced carrots, celery, onions and sweat them in a sauce pan with some extra-virgin olive oil. Then add minced garlic and tomatoes along with the secret spices and bring it to a boil before reducing to a simmer to thicken. Puree the sauce in a blender or food processor before adding the final seasonings to take it to perfection.

We each rolled out the dough we made by hand the day before, to the size of a large dinner plate. Added sauce, pepperoni, seasoned ground beef, two kinds of cheese, onions, and black olives to one half of the dough. I folded over the other half and pinched the edges together to seal the goodies inside. Then I brushed the top and edges with an egg wash, sprinkled on some diced green peppers I forgot to put inside, said a prayer of thanks to the pizza gods, and placed the whole thing in the oven until it was golden brown.

I took my expertly-cooked calzone, which I drizzled with a little more sauce and a pinch of cheese for presentation, along with my tossed spinach salad with homemade ranch dressing and bacon bits, back to my seat. I cut into the sealed pocket of yummy goodness and released a smell that I swear came straight from Heaven. The gooeyness of the melted cheese, the combination of the flavored meats, the crunchy yet flaky crust, and the sauce – oh that sauce – it all came together to form a full frontal assault on every one of my senses when I took that first bite.



I'm not too proud to say, I got a little misty eyed. For the 30 minutes or so I took to savor every bite of this wonderful meal, I was no longer a prisoner. I was a youngster again sitting in my Gramma Degi's kitchen, watching her dance around – seasoning here and tasting there – while she hummed Italian love songs and called me her Bambino Dolce (sweet baby).

An old school inmate gave me some advice when I first came to TDCJ. He said, "Spin, you gotta let go of that outside world. It's only going to bring you heartache and disappointment. THIS is your world now and you better start living in it." Looking back I can honestly say that was the DUMBEST thing I ever heard. My body may be imprisoned here but my mind certainly is NOT! I LIVE in the memories of the loved ones I have left behind, in the reality of the world going on around me – here and in the free world, and in the HOPE of a better future when I can finally walk through those prison gates and start the next chapter of my life. Education and Vocation classes, like the one I am taking, are the bridge to make those hopes and dreams become a reality.

Write to your unit's Education Department and ask to speak to a counselor to discuss your options. At my unit, her name is Ms. P [REDACTED] and she is awesome. She took the time to talk to me about my experiences from life and my thoughts about the future, and together we came up with the right class to give me a fighting chance at being financially independent while still doing something I love.

Do I see myself getting out and becoming the next Gordon Ramsey or Emeril Lagasse? No – not likely. But I CAN see myself using my business management skills, paired with my culinary education, and seasoned with my new love of cooking to come up with a recipe for success with a food truck or two – or maybe even a fleet of them. The possibilities are endless and my future looks a heck of a lot more appetizing.



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