

IN SLAMMER, HONEY BUNS SWEETEN THE SITUATION

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The honey buns enter lockup the same way anyone else does: bound, escorted through halls and sally ports, and secluded in small boxes solely opened from the outside. From there the honey buns languish for days, maybe longer, until they're gone.

They are a lowly, sturdy food designed for desperate cravings and vending machine convenience. They can endure weeks of neglect and even a mild mashing in a coat pocket or backpack. They are, it should come as no surprise, especially beloved by a similarly hardy but disrespected population: Florida's prison inmates.

Inmates in the Florida prison system buy 270,000 honey buns a month. Across the state, they sell more than tobacco, envelopes and cans of Coke. And they're just as popular among Tampa Bay's county jails. In Pasco's Land O'Lakes Detention Center, they're outsold only by freeze-dried coffee and ramen noodles.

Not only that, these honey buns - so puffy! - have taken on lives of their own among the criminal class: as currency for trades, as bribes for favors, as relievers for stress and substitutes for addiction. They've become birthday cakes, hooch wines, last meals - even ingredients in a massive tax fraud.

So what is it about these little golden glazed snacks? Is it that they're cheap, which is big, since the prisoners rely on cash from friends and family? That their sugary denseness could stop a speeding bullet? That they're easy, their mise en place just the unwrapping of plastic? What gives?

Maybe considering the honey bun can help us understand life behind bars.

Jailhouse cuisine is a closely calculated science.

A day's meals inside the mess hall must be hearty enough to meet the 2,750-calorie count, healthy enough to limit fat and sodium, easy enough for prison cooks to prepare and cheap enough to meet the state's average grocery bill - about \$1.76 per inmate per day.

With all criteria met, meals behind bars achieve an impressive level of mediocrity. The portions are reasonable, the nutritional content adequate, the taste ordinary, the presentation dull, the blandness as inescapable as the facilities themselves. The meals are made to

guarantee very little except survival.

Problem inmates don't have it any easier. Their punishment: "special management meals" of Nutraloaf, a tasteless lump of carrots, spinach and grits that resembles a sad fruitcake.

Compared to that, honey buns are a revolution. Honey buns are fried dough in a bag. Honey buns meet next to none of the human body's needs and are impressively unhealthy.

The 6 ounces of a Mrs. Freshley's Grand Honey Bun, the favored pastry of Florida's prisons, serve up 680 calories, 51 grams of sugar and 30 grams of fat. The icing is sticky and frost white, like Elmer's Glue. The taste bears all the subtlety of a freshly licked sugar cube.

"As you can imagine," said Janice Anderson, a spokeswoman for Flowers Foods, which owns the Mrs. Freshley's brand, "this product is for those folks that feel like having something very decadent."

Decadent!

Inmates at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women used honey buns as the base for a Christmas apple pie. Inmates at the Robeson County Jail in Lumberton, N.C., mixed in honey buns to sweeten a wine they fermented from orange juice. During his two-month stay in an Illinois jail cell, NFL defensive tackle Tank Johnson gulped down, after hearty meals of beef sticks and summer sausages, 40 honey buns for dessert.

Prisoners on death row have even turned to the sweets for their last meals. Charles Roache, lethally injected in North Carolina in 2004, chose a sirloin steak, popcorn shrimp and a honey bun.

George Alec Robinson, an unemployed sanitation worker and father of three, paid his public defenders in honey buns after they saved him from Virginia's electric chair.

"He said, 'This is all in the world I can give you guys,'" attorney James C. Clark told the Washington Post. "They were good, too."

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In September, the day after the New Orleans Saints beat the San Francisco 49ers in a Monday Night Football game, a fight broke out in the Alpha Pod of the Hernando County Jail.

Inmate Ricardo Sellers, 21, had punched Brandon Markey, 23, in the face, sending Markey to a Brooksville hospital, according to Hernando deputies. Sellers was angry that Markey hadn't paid up after losing a bet over football.

His debt? Four honey buns.

For all their sweetness, honey buns have a history of involvement in prison violence. In 2006, at the Kent County Jail in Michigan, inmate Benny Rochelle dragged his cell mate off the top bunk, killing the man, when he could not find his honey bun. And last year, at the Lake Correctional Institution west of Orlando, two men were sentenced to life in prison for stabbing with crude shivs the man they thought had stolen shaving cream, cigarettes and a honey bun from their footlockers.

Yes, murder over honey buns. Was it their decadence, or their status as jailhouse currency?

In Texas and Pennsylvania, inmates bartered honey buns for tablets of Seroquel, an addictive antipsychotic abused on the street as a sleeping pill.

In Sarasota, a millionaire businessman charged with child abuse earned the nickname "Commissary King" after fashioning honey buns into birthday cakes for inmates he felt he could sway to his defense.

In Naples, a bail bondsman was accused of giving an inmate hundreds of dollars' worth of honey buns over 13 years as rewards for referring him business.

And at the Graceville Work Camp, in the Panhandle, a Jacksonville trucker known for sharing his faith called it one of his great joys to sneak honey buns under inmates' pillows.

In some cases, honey buns have proven too seductive for inmates' own good. At the Stock Island Detention Center, outside Key West, scheming inmates offered overnight arrestees in the jail's drunk tank an irresistible deal: their Social Security numbers for a honey bun. Using the numbers, they filled out tax forms with phony information - a scam that cost the IRS more than \$1 million in fraudulent refunds.

As a retired Monroe County sheriff told the Miami Herald, "They were eating a lot of honey buns on the taxpayer."

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After Ryan Frederick took the stand last year during his capital murder trial in Virginia, prosecutor James Willett made a strange request.

Stand up. Open your jacket. Turn sideways.

When he had been arrested for shooting a detective during a drug raid, Frederick had weighed 120 pounds, according to the Virginian-Pilot. After a year in lockup, he ballooned to 185.

Exhibit A: Frederick's gut.

"You're not exactly wasting away from regret and remorse now, are you?" Willett said.

Frederick's behavior at the Chesapeake City Jail was central to prosecutors' argument that he had bragged of the killing. His weight gain, they said, further proved his shamelessness.

But during his testimony, Frederick said the extra pounds stemmed from something else.

To deal with the stresses of jail, he said, he ate.

"I have a bad habit of doughnuts and honey buns," he told the jury.

Some inmates use honey buns to combat cravings deeper than a sweet tooth. At the Hernando County Jail, where honey buns are regulars atop the bestsellers list, the sweets have served as substitutes for other vices.

"Many people in jail are addicts or abusers of substances," said jail administrator Maj. Mike Page. "Alcohol is based in sugars generally, and the human body will receive some satisfaction of cravings from the honey bun as a substitute for the sugar."

Armon Power, an inmate at Alabama's Holman Correctional Facility who earned 30 cents an hour stamping license plates at the prison tag plant, explained it to a TV crew in simpler terms:

"I crave honey buns. I buy honey buns," he said. "I can't buy no wine."

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Convicted murderer Michael Caruso is a canteen operator at the Zephyrhills state prison. His is a prestigious job. Of all the tedious prison work, his pays the most (\$75 a month) and affords him the sweetest office: front and center to the boxes of honey buns.

He sells about 60 sweets a day at this sprawling, razor-wired campus of mostly elderly prisoners in east Pasco. The men like to smother the honey buns with peanut butter Squeezers packets. Some inmates, he said, try to "manipulate" him into handing them over for free, though most think their \$1.08 price tags, cheaper than foods like the \$2.75 Big AZ Bubba Twins chili cheese dogs, are easier to stomach.

"It's the same as on the street," Caruso said. "When you get paid you drink Budweiser. After that you drink Black Label."

In prison, as in life, thrift wins. In 2009, when Florida upped its canteen prices, 60 families called and wrote letters to complain. Most of the anger, according to the Associated Press, centered on the price of honey buns, raised from 66 cents to 99 cents. (To, now, \$1.08.)

But something funny happens, Caruso said. On Fridays, inmates will buy up honey buns for the weekend, when they gather in the dayroom to watch football. The prisoners share. Seems to happen all the time.

Maybe that's what it is with honey buns. They're sweet, when nothing else is.

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