

Clink Cuisine

If your moral conscience wasn't enough, a look at prison meals could keep you on the good side of the law. *By Mat Thomas*

THIS PAST MAY, DEATH ROW INMATE PHILIP Workman requested an unusual last meal just before his execution by lethal injection at Riverbend Maximum Security Prison in Nashville, Tenn. A former cocaine addict convicted of fatally shooting a cop while robbing a Wendy's franchise in 1981, Workman asked that a vegetarian pizza be given to a random homeless person instead of himself. However, citing protocol, prison officials denied the condemned man his last wish.

The case made national headlines, begging the question, how much control do vegetarian and vegan prisoners have over their diets? "That depends on where you're serving your sentence," says Peter Young, an activist indicted under the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act after releasing thousands of mink from fur farms in 1997. Young spent nearly two years in various county, state and federal lockups. "County and state jails are under no legal obligation to serve vegetarian food, and can withhold it for just about any reason—cost, inconvenience, health concerns, even punishment," he says. One jail denied Young's participation in an established vegan meal program because, he claims, the warden hated his political profile. They eventually relented under pressure from Young's attorney and phone calls from activists on the outside.

Federal prisons are another story, because the Bureau of Prisons requires that a vegetarian alternative is served at every meal. They must also provide a "common-fare diet" designed to fulfill the dietary dictates of certain religious sects. While meat is included in the pre-fabricated, shrink-wrapped tray of each common-fare meal,

vegetarians can give or trade that away. But first, convicts have to earn the common-fare meal plan by convincing the prison chaplain through a rigorous interview process that they are sincere adherents of a particular religion. Ethical veganism shares some of the same deep roots as the world's great spiritual traditions—take the Old Testament commandment "Thou shalt not kill" for starters. Yet vegans, who practice what they preach, do not enjoy the same legal protections as religious devotees.

In the mess hall, Young found that about half of the vegetarian "line" selections were vegan, and self-serve staples like rice and beans were always available. Once a week, he and his fellow prisoners could also purchase basic groceries at the commissary using money earned through in-house work or donated by family and friends. However, the offerings in different prisons vary, and the lack of dietary diversity in even the best institutions

could pose nutritional-adequacy problems for inmates doing a long stretch.

That's why Young calls the black market "a must for vegan survival." With the right connections, vegan inmates can acquire just about any specialty items they desire—for a price. Lucky for them, meat is the underground bartering system's most valuable commodity, so those who use animal products as currency rather than rations have more bargaining power. Young claims, for example, that a single piece of fried chicken once got him about \$10 worth of vegan comestibles.

Serving in medium-security facilities, Young was a world away from Workman on Murderer's Row, where no activist working in the cause of animals has yet been banished. The prison system rejected Workman's last wish, but it was ultimately carried out with much farther-reaching implications than he expected. In just one day, activists raised enough money to deliver about 200 vegetarian pizzas to shelters in several states.

Workman was executed the day before the feast, and died not knowing his gift was received and appreciated. Even so, his final inspiring act of generosity in this life says something significant about our highest spiritual calling: to help each other *without* harming others. Who knows? Maybe it was the death sentence this convicted murderer shared in common with "meat" animals that awakened his compassion for every incarcerated being, and everyone who, in the end, faces the nameless terror of annihilation. **VN**

Mat Thomas pens *News Beet Extra* in every edition of *VegNews*. Read more of his writing at animalrighter.org.

