

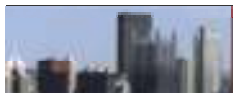


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In state's prisons, inmates can eat vegetarian

By Mary Pickles TRIBUNE-REVIEW Sunday, May 18, 2008



The Alabama prison system has a simple and inexpensive solution to satisfying vegetarian inmates: Take the meat off the tray, and dinner is served.

But the 46,000 inmates in Pennsylvania's 27 state institutions can choose entrees such as tofu cacciatore, soy barbecue, veggie burgers and soy sausage patties.

The state's catering to vegetarian prisoners' taste buds caught the attention of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which ranked Pennsylvania third on its "Top 10 Vegetarian-Friendly Prisons" list.

"PETA frequently hears from prisoners asking how they can get more vegetarian menus," said PETA spokeswoman Lindsey Rajt.

story continues below

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SCI-Pittsburgh

Keith Hodan/Tribune-Review

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Vegetarian menu

Keith Hodan/Tribune-Review

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John Klocko

Keith Hodan/Tribune-Review

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It's a dubious distinction, some say.

"If somebody has been convicted of a crime and sent to prison, they don't deserve special treatment," said Rep. Daryl Metcalfe, R-Cranberry.

"They should have to eat what is put before them, as long as it's the most cost-effective, with nutrition to keep them as healthy as possible so we don't have to incur additional medical costs while they are in jail.

"I don't think any prisoner deserves to be catered to in any way, shape or manner."

Alabama's Department of Corrections, which ranked near the bottom of PETA's list, offers a pork-free menu for those inmates whose religions stipulate it, said public information manager Brian Corbett. Others can just skip the meat.

"The rest of what you are having is essentially a vegetarian diet," he said.

Not mandated

On a recent morning, John Klocko, food services manager at SCI-Pittsburgh, oversaw the preparation of lunch for 1,000. As pasta for macaroni and cheese boiled in 100-gallon kettles, fish baked in the kitchen's ovens.

The day's lunch menu included 50 bean burgers for inmates who prefer to go meatless.

Since 1997, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has offered meatless alternatives, spokeswoman Susan McNaughton said.

"It is available to all inmates during what we call regular mainline or the main feeding for inmates," McNaughton said.

The federal and state prison systems are not mandated by law to offer protein alternatives, although both do. There have been numerous court cases addressing such requests from prisoners,

[Finished casserole](#)

Keith Hodan/Tribune-Review

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but the decision to provide vegetarian meals was made by the correctional systems.

"We use our alternative to respond to the health and lifestyle needs of various classes of inmates -- health, diabetes, heart-related problems, religion," McNaughton said. "Kosher diets and specialized vegan diets present a slightly different problem, and our food service professionals have created appropriate alternatives to provide a balanced, healthy meal with equivalent caloric values."

The sodium content in state prison menus was reduced in 2003, which helped to reduce the number of special medical diets, such as for inmates with high blood pressure, she said.

Meals for inmates in Pennsylvania's prisons cost an average of \$2.73 per day, including the protein-alternative options. That's a nickel over the average daily cost of \$2.68 to feed the nation's 201,000 federal prisoners, a spokesman said.

Corbett said Alabama's refusal to offer vegetarian meals is based on practicality.

"You are preparing food for 30,000 people a day," he said. "If you do something special for one, in my opinion, you are opening up a whole lot of doors."

Food for thought

Some victims' advocate groups and others feel that because prison is punishment, catering to food preferences is egregious.

Matthew J. Brouillette, president of the Commonwealth Foundation for Public Policy Alternatives, a conservative research and educational institution based in Harrisburg, joked that prison meals might be considered "akin to cruel and unusual punishment."

"However, what if an inmate claimed they could only eat filet mignon and lobster?" he said. "This can be taken to the absurd, of course, so we must remember these people have committed crimes against our fellow citizens and it is called 'hard time' for a reason."

Klocko believes serving inmates healthy, appetizing food is a good thing.

"We're not serving filet mignon," he said. "It is institutional food."

Will Marling, executive director of the National Organization for Victim Assistance, said it's a "challenge wrestling with the different needs and rights" of inmates.

"Everybody recognizes the need to treat people humanely," Marling said.

But inmates file "endless, endless lawsuits and appeals for all sorts of things, with state funding at their beck and call," he said.

In fact, it was a federal inmate's lawsuit 10 years ago that led to a judge's order to provide him with soy milk.

"It's quite troubling when inmates seem to have so many privileges," Marling said. "Special privilege is the issue. It's not a dietary issue. There would be some victims who would want them to suffer."

The Arizona system

Joseph M. Arpaio, longtime sheriff in Maricopa County, Ariz., believes prison should be as unrewarding as possible. His methods have earned him national recognition.

Arpaio budgets about 35 cents per meal for the twice-a-day feedings of 10,000 inmates he oversees.

Vegetarian meals are available only to inmates with religious or health restrictions.

Brunch is a bologna sandwich and maybe an orange. Dinner is a hot meal. The inmates receive 2,500 calories a day, 300 fewer than SCI prisoners.

"We've got a dietitian on staff," Arpaio said.

While SCI-Pittsburgh inmates can season their food, Arpaio outlawed ketchup, mustard, salt and pepper, saving more than \$100,000 a year, he said.

"They can buy (condiments) at the commissary," he said.

But Klocko believes satisfying inmates' palates is both a mood booster and safety enhancer.

"Good morale and good food is good security," he said.

Arpaio disagrees.

Giving inmates choices on the chow line is coddling, he said.

He's heard plenty of inmates grumbling about everything from the pink underwear he issues to his ban on smoking, coffee and pornography.

"You don't live nice in jail or prison," Arpaio said. "You get punished. Good food is not punishment."

Mary Pickels can be reached at mpickels@tribweb.com or 724-836-5401.

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