





# DEAR FRIEND,

The book that I told you about? I finally finished it, nine years after I embarked on this project. I titled it *When Cooking Was A Crime: Masak in the Singapore Prisons, 1970s–80s*.

*Masak* means “to cook” in Malay. But to former inmates incarcerated during that period, it meant turning chamber pots into cooking pots and blankets into fuel to secretly produce hot, savoury suppers in their cells. I came to know about *masak* by chance. Then an aspiring food writer, I cold-called a restaurateur who was formerly an inmate. I asked to interview him about his experience of prison meals, but he offered to tell me about *masak* instead!

You see, prison food was routinely cold and so repetitive that it became a torture to eat. So, the inmates heated up canned food from the commissaries and mixed them with ingredients they set aside from lunch or dinner. Some even set up traps to catch and cook wild pigeons, rabbits or cats. They devised many ways to set up fire, often resorting to stealing tools or smuggling them from outside the prisons.

A few recipes required no cooking, but were creative nonetheless. Round peanut candies were shaped with a hollow chess piece, and birthday cakes with layers of magazine covers held together by rice glue.

I gathered so much information, from the first interviewee and the subsequent seven, that it became daunting to organise. To be honest, the combined topic of prison and food requires little editorial effort to stir interest. But I was not keen on sensationalising the story. The study of food and the behaviours around it have created a better understanding of different people and situations. I asked myself: what might *masak* tell us about inmates and prison conditions?

If I wanted to properly analyse my data, I thought, I better use a coding method that I learned in grad school. I shall not bore with you the details, but it eventually helped me identify both the explicit and implicit meanings of food, the latter of which, I believe, the inmates weren’t aware themselves. These meanings formed the four chapters of my book: food as punishment, freedom, control and play.

Prison meals were unintentionally punishing to eat because they had to be prepared many hours before meal times. But inmates also had a hand in making the meals dull, because many of them colluded with the inmate cooks to steal ingredients, leaving meagre portions and undesirable meat cuts for the rest.

*Masak* then became a way for them to produce hot food and recreate the familiar tastes of hawker fare that they no longer had access to. The final product might seem remote from the original, but with a little bit of imagination, it transported them beyond the prison walls.

Making food also gave inmates a sense of control. Imagine having no say over your haircut and even bowel routine. I know I would feel less like a person and more like property. Making food choices—choosing to pair tofu with luncheon meat (spam) instead of canned pig trotter—was a rare act of free will in prisons. It helped restore some dignity to the inmates.

Finally, cooking was akin to playing. Even though it was largely seen as women’s work in that

time, inmates never saw *masak* as feminine. Instead, they thought it was fun because it required them to break several rules and play a game of cat-and-mouse with the guards. Some food even became an object of play in itself. Rumour has it that some inmates used raw squids for masturbation to simulate a wet vagina! While the account was disputed, many inmates refused to eat squid rings that were of the “right” size.

As you can see, I collected many interesting anecdotes. But however well I can write, the book would be incomplete without pictures to illustrate the inmates’ creations. There were no visual records of the items, so nobody, except the inmates, knew what they looked like.

Luckily, I found Don. He is not only a competent photographer, but was also very keen on reproducing the recipes and tools from scratch. He said going through the process would allow him to experience the inmates’ frustrations and successes. So, he scraped a can against the floor to open it with his bare hands, and sharpened a chicken bone against the wall to make a shiv. By the end of the photo-shoot, which took him the entire lockdown period last year, there were many holes and scratch marks in his home. But Don was pleased. This tedious exercise gave us a glimpse of the extent of the inmates’ depravity and boredom.

The thing that I least expected to be challenging was food styling. Conventional food photography entices, but that was not our goal for the book. In Don’s words, “it should appease curiosity, rather than evoke appetite”. We were therefore careful to avoid the food magazine look, but that was tough. A single dish against a black background tends to look gourmet. But I think we eventually managed that by focusing on making the ingredients recognisable, so that people can appreciate the inmates’ ingenuity in improvising with available resources.

Also, instead of using plates and bowls that could make a *masak* dish unnecessarily fancy, we packed them into transparent plastic bags and shot the food through the bags.

The book was finally published in December last year, but my work, my friend, is not over. I now have to go around asking bookstores if they want to carry it. I have also been pitching it to the media. Urgh, it’s such a bummer to discuss money right after the euphoria of creating original content. I wish I could just sit back and wait for people to discover it. But that’s not good for business, is it? So, here’s where you can show your support: [shop.inplainwords.sg](http://shop.inplainwords.sg)

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SHEERE

