

# Chip Night

I was born in the late eighties and grew up with my sister and my single parent working mother. Predictably when the time to feed us came around convenience food was going to be the order of the day most nights and it was here my relationship with chips started to form. You know the sequence; oven chips and pizza, grilled chips and burgers, fried chips eggs and beans and of course not forgetting the classic: Chip Shop chips, there's nothing quite like the stench of a house whilst chips from the Chippy are being consumed.

Cigarette smokers have often spoke of and highlighted the unwrapping of a cigarette packet or the first spark and pull of a cigarette as being just as enjoyable as smoking the cigarette itself, I can completely understand that type of outlook when it is applied to chips from the Chippy.

It all starts with excavating of the slightly damp chip parcel from the steamy plastic bag. Then there is the opening of the white paper packaging to reveal the light golden treasure that you just want to eat so badly simultaneously the pong of chips attacks your nasal passages. Salt and vinegar are then applied with vigour and smother the chips which exaggerate an already intense odour from the hot, crispy, steamy portion. To finish a big dollop of tomato ketchup is glugged on the side of the white paper staining it purposefully in the process. A chip hasn't even been consumed yet but it is already box office.

In the British takeaway market, I would not say the Chip Shop is one of the most exciting options available to us. There are countless fast food chains that would leave a Chip Shop in their wake. McDonalds, Chinese, KFC to name but a few but without doubt the Chip Shop has a loyal fan base throughout the country and the prison is no different in this regard.

Chip Night in any prison you go to is also known as a 'Big night' and it is where pleasures and pains are felt frequently.

Let me explain, if you are lucky enough to catch somebody who maybe on a diet or has just come back from a chocolate munching visit or incredibly doesn't like chips then it is your lucky day, you have doubled up on your chip portion for the night. A plate full of chips with a golden-battered fish and green mushy peas, DELISH. All the dish needs now is a squirt of red sauce and mayonnaise. The night is now looking good

with many cravings satisfied and the tone for a happy weekend has been set. All you need now is EastEnders at eight and the night is complete.

Reversely if you get to the servery too late and they have run out of chips or the prison kitchens send 100 portions to feed 150 or the chips are over/undercooked then let me tell you there is a sinking disconsolate feeling that follows and it feels as if somebody has just punched straight through the stomach, though that feeling could partly be down to hunger pains. In any case frustration is what stands out to me as being the overriding emotion and I have seen many unseemly incidents over this type of inconvenience.

In one instance, I came back from the gymnasium one night and as part of the gym goers we had the thankless task of being fed last as the dinner service starts some time before the gym session finishes. I and the other gym goers approached the servery line in hot anticipation of our chips having just worked up a nice appetite from a strenuous workout. Unfortunately, we were met with the horrendous news that the servery had run out of chips. To add more disappointment to us hungry henchmen the cleaning officer said the kitchens would only substitute the chips with the infamous boiled potatoes and not more chips.

This was a piece of information that deeply saddened us all. It was like a queue of 20 people in a state of mourning. Faces that 5 minutes ago were happy and energised by a good workout were now angered and devastated. Everybody was angry and frustrated and when violent offenders are angry, frustrated and not to mention hungry negative behaviour soon follows.

One of the inmates two spaces ahead of me shouted "The servery lads are hiding chips!!" in a tone every bit as accusing as his statement. He then shouted, "I will jump over this servery and start going mad you know". This was a 6ft 2in, 15 stone tipped 27-year-old with a host of tattoos so as you could imagine the look alone was menacing. The officer present then said, "come on there's no need for that lads, just calm down". The inmate then hollered "calm down, calm down, I want my fucking chips. Get me my chips and then I'll calm down how about that".

The angered inmate inadvertently spotted some of the servery workers giggling in a condescending manner which heightened him to a level beyond. He then responded to the giggling by audaciously taking a step

up on to the servery counter saying, “You think this is a joke, you think it’s funny”. Meanwhile all bystanders looked on in shock and fear, even the giggling servery workers now looked scared as they must have feared he was going to attack them. It’s funny because 24/7 prisoners give it the big I am but the moment any action happens their mask slips for a second or two and they look petrified.

Amazingly as the inmate got on top of the counter he just paused, looked into the eyes of the stunned servery workers and aborted his plan returning to the ground on the correct side of the servery. At this moment, I think we all felt that he had seen sense but that wasn’t to be the case. Upon returning to the ground he started walking around in small circles saying, “you think I’m a dick-head, you think I’m a dick-head”. As his back was turned on one of the circular routes that he prowled in a servery worker whispered “Yeah”. The inmate heard this so he then rushed towards his blue chip less plate containing beans and a Chicken Kiev alone and launched it at the servery lads. The four white suited servery workers ducked down in unison with their white servery hats dropping off their heads due to the speed at which they ducked. With beans, everywhere obscenities were then exchanged between the servery workers and the raging inmate but he then made himself scarce. When he left the scene, I remember thinking ‘Don’t ever play with prisoners’ chips’. I assume some punishment for the inmate followed but I didn’t keep tabs on the story.

I remember back in my early days of prison I quickly became acquainted with the mundane cuisine on offer. The carbohydrates heavily consisted of boiled, new and mashed potatoes and all seemed to be cooked to a laughable standard. As you could imagine I was not best pleased with the diet I would be adopting for now and many years to come and a pain inside me began to ache.

For the first couple of weeks I did not eat with any anticipation of keenness like I usually did pre-prison but the ‘Ground Hog Day’ feeling did not carry through the whole week. I noticed that on certain days of the week I would feel lighter and happier and at first, I did not know why. After a couple of months, I recognised that it was on Chip Night that my mood would be lifted and I made the link that my feeling happy was down to the very fact that it was Chip Night.

I would regularly receive portions of chips that were very small but such was the relief to be getting something other than potatoes and because I was new to prison life I still managed to get in turn with my grateful side.

To make up for the minuscule portions of chips I would attain four slices of bread laden with butter and stingily apply approximately 4-5 single chips per slice. If I got a really small portion of chips I probably would only use three out of the four slices of bread as I always liked to finish the meal with half a handful of chips with the meagre piece of fish.

Nowadays I have learnt various tricks of the trade to ensure that Chip Night is a good night. Over the years I have had to become adept at the art form of Chip-raising as Chip Nights generally occur twice in a week throughout the prison estate and one of those nights is universally on a Friday. If you have a bad Chip Night on Friday it will kick your weekends off in dreadful fashion and you cannot afford bad weekends because they can turn into bad weeks, bad months and so on. Here are a few tips into the art of Chip-raising.

1. Be good friends with the servery workers
2. Bribe the servery workers
3. Spot a fellow inmate who does not like chips and do the same to him as the servery workers
4. Spot a person who is going for a visit early Friday afternoon and make the request as he comes back from the visit
5. Never fall out with your chip donors
6. Work in the prison kitchens so you get fresh ones and plenty of them

A part of me does feel a sense of guilt when asking the servery workers for favours/deals because I do empathize with the struggles and pressures that they endure on a daily basis and especially during Chip Night. A chip server will experience heat like no other and I do not envy his position. In many jails prison officers serve chips to stop the arguments but even the sturdiest of prison officers' fear chip serving.

Being in prison is huge test in itself but surely serving chips on the servery has to be the toughest test of them all. I have witnessed even the strongest of inmates succumb to the pressure of chip serving. Let me make an observation. If you see a prisoner serving chips, and he has been doing so for some time in perceived comfort then that is an indication that he is underworld connected. I speak no more and move swiftly on.

In an attempt to make the prison cuisine better over the years I have attended many food forums. A food forum is where a couple of inmates from every wing have a meeting with the kitchen manager and the

governor and discuss the catering in the prison. The inmates put forward their issues and ideas of improvement and they are discussed and solved or revisited at the next forum. You always manage to get some idiot on the forum asking to introduce more soup to replace crisps or biscuits. What a mug!

The readers might say “what’s wrong with a bit of soup?” That tells me that they have never tasted prison soup. Prison soup is so bad that you could feed 100 people with 30 portions because 70 won’t take any. I prefer to call it flavoured water. As you could imagine during the forums I am always the one to say, “There is not enough chips being sent to the wings”. Irrespective of whether there are enough chips or not I always argue for more. My philosophy is ‘You can never have too many chips’.

I wouldn’t consider myself a ‘putting in a complaint kind of person’ however, if chips are undercooked or over cooked then I have no qualms about putting in a complaint without hesitation. I have often questioned my affinity with chips and asked myself, is this even healthy? I regularly come to the conclusion that clearly it’s not for the body and it’s clearly not healthy for the mind to have this level of craving for anything. At the same time chips are one of my mother’s favourite foods and when I eat them I think of her. My jail experience has taken me away from her and I think subconsciously the chip thing is my way of staying close to her. I yearn to eat a portion of chips with my mother again.

I have come to realise that nostalgia is a very powerful tool. A simple thing like eating chips with my mother has ended up becoming a very significant experience that would not have been expected to make such a mark on my life. I remember being on a visit with my mother and somehow, we got talking about food. She then made a comment like ‘Yeah I love my chips man.’ And I started to chuckle. She thought I was laughing at her but in my head, I was thinking ‘I knew I got the chip infatuation from you.’ I remained silent and another thought popped into my head ‘if my mother was in a women’s jail would she be the chip addict like me?’ I can see it. This made me chuckle again.

I often joke with fellow inmates if we were in certain American states we could be receiving our last meal for the crimes we have committed. I then asked them what their last meal would be. On a personal note, I would be spoilt for choice because I love so many foods but I know that the carbohydrates would definitely be chips.

After all this chip talk, I don't think I want to talk about chips ever again and just eat them instead. However, there is no getting away from chip talk in prison. In every prison in the country you will know when it's Chip Night without fail because you can't go anywhere in the establishment without hearing someone saying, "It's chips tonight". They say your never eight feet away from a rat, well in a prison your never eight feet away from somebody on Chip Night saying, "Its chips tonight". I mean I love chips just as much as the next man but even I get sick of hearing people saying, "Its chips tonight".