Cooking in Maximum Security

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A few weeks ago now, an article in a most unlikely place alerted me to the publication of a book called Cooking in Maximum Security, a collection of recipes and inventions compiled by Matteo Guidi with inmates in some of Italy's maximum security prisons. One thing led to another and I found myself sitting with Matteo Guidi and learning about his strange and enlightening book, which all began when he was asked to teach a series of workshops.

Matteo: I entered the prison with this imaginary that all the movies, especially American movies, build in our mind. This kind of terrible situation, really bad men. Entering — this was a classroom — entered there and I found a group of 12 guys, more or less like me, only they were older than me, basically, but with the same clothes, you know, with a pair of jeans and a jacket like mine. And I say, wow! This is the first perception that I have, is I'm not so far from my everyday life, you know. So I'm far because the situation is totally different. But you appear like my colleagues.

Jeremy: No orange jumpsuits, then just a bunch of guys wanting to make a book. A book that would reflect their everyday lives. A book that, when it was published in English this year, explains why I went up to chat to Matteo Guidi and find out more. It's called cooking in Maximum Security.

Matteo: Is a funny book, but is bitter, so it's a funny book that leaves you something bitter in the mouth, in the final. That is important for me because it's a way to have open reflection about ...

The idea came from, came out from another place. You don't expect it. It's a kind of unexpected process. And we were speaking and some of them — Piero — that actually is out of the prison after more than 20 years spent in maximum security prison, but is out because he was innocent. That's really important that not all the people that are in

prison. Maybe they did what they did. And he take off from his bag, a piece of bread. And it was ... So I was so surprised because the bread was not classic kind of bread, it was a really typical Sardinia bread, like pane carasau. And I say, oh, wow, this is pane carasau. Ah, yeah. But where did you buy it? No, no, I didn't buy it, I made it. And when he said I made it, I said, oh, that's something for me ... unbelievable. The second surprise was that I really ... You can cook it yourself? Yes, of course we can cook and we cook a lot. Well, no, no, you need to explain to me how you cook it. And he starts to explain.

So I do this, and I prepare a flour with water and blah, blah, blah. And when they, when the mass is finished, I put in a bowl. And this bowl I put on the top of my TV. That if you remember, they are warm, quite warm. And so wow, you put on the top of the TV of course, because the cell is cold. And I asked them, do you think there are other processes and kitchen practices that you developed here that could be similar, so that you need to invent small strategies in order to arrive to the final result, that is, the plate, finished plate? And he said, of course, there are a lot. We continue inventing something, also inventing tools that we don't have.

Jeremy: Reading the book, I mean, it's astonishing. It's astonishing. They have loads and loads of recipes for things that are normal Italian cuisine. I mean, absolutely standard cuisine. But the thing that surprised me more than anything else was they're allowed to do it because ... You mentioned the American films. I mean, if you've seen Goodfellas and the cooking, this is a privilege because these are big guys. They're gangsters, they're controlling the prison. But this cooking in Italian maximum security is an absolutely normal part of life.

Matteo: Um, yeah. There's ... One of my questions when we started to work on this book with them, because in the beginning, I started to work with them. And after, I moved the project to other different ... Seven penitentiaries from north to south of Italy, I was working bilaterally with most of them. And one of my questions with them was, but guys, so if we publish something in this book that could be dangerous for you in some way. So we publish the way that you can make, I don't know, a knife or some tools that could be perceived like dangerous tools. And they say, no, no, don't worry, because everybody knows that this knife is a knife for the kitchen practices, this knife that they need to cut garlic really thin, not to do something to someone.

And so this was something for me, important to precise with them and the one that this book could make problem to you and all the inmates in ... And also remember that when we publish first time the book, because in the beginning was published like a really small book, like 24 pages printed directly in the prison, because they have a printing machine like an offset printing machine. And there were some politicians and some people from the penitentiary that they were, they were using this book as a flag, like, we do this in our ... You know, one of the first articles that was published, also about this book in online was from the same penitentiary administrative web page. Like, was surprising for me.

And it's a kind of really common and regional kitchen. So all the recipes, they have there, they are, most of them, the recipes they do, their wife, their mom, in their houses. That's important, because when we speak about men cooking in this society, we continue to think about really, stars, Michelin chefs, because the everyday kitchen is a place of women. It's still a place of women. But in this case is totally everyday life kitchen made for a group of, more for a group, for men. Only men. And they continue to try to improve this kind of kitchen. They speak with their partner or their mother by phone asking them, hey, please help me in order to improve my lasagna recipe. Or what did you put in the, you know, and in the recipe when you are doing, Mom, because mine is different from you. And the other thing important is when they do this recipes, they move themselves in some way to their original ... place of birth, families, that is one of the reasons, because ... It's important also that, I spoke once with a guy that was working in a public library in, I don't remember, it was in Milan, and he said, mostly of the books they asked to me from the prison in Milan, they are recipe books. So they want to receive recipe books, but they continue to do really regional kitchens, so they don't improve.

Jeremy: The thing I didn't understand from the book, are they doing this alone or in ... You know, each man in his own cell, or are they doing it as a group, communally?

Matteo: No. In maximum security prison, it's supposed that the cells, they are individual. So it means that if you are in this level of surveillance, it means that you should stay alone during the night. So it means you need you should sleep alone. And so this is the way to have the individual cell. But what's happened in this last ten years? As

you know, in Italy they had this problem that the prison started to be full, no? They are mostly of the people that needs to be supported. So they are in over number of people. And so also maximum security prison. They start to put other people in cells, but is not is not legal. So it means that if I'm in a maximum security prison, the law say that they should stay alone. And so they cook, basically, they cook is alone practices, but they are sharing in this period because their cell they share.

Jeremy: The prison is supplying them with with breakfast, with lunch, with dinner. So this is extra to their prison food.

Matteo: Yeah, they got the, of course, they have the three meals per day. So the state guaranteed they give to them these three meals. But you know what happened, that I think also is a way to resist a condition. And this is a way also to say "I'm a subject" in a place that tries to transform me into an object. I'm a subject. As a subject, I want to eat what I want today. Maybe or maybe not. But I want to eat ... today I want to eat this mozzarella and nothing more. Yeah, it's a way to say, okay, I take distance from you. And also it's a way to, for most of them, is a way to pass time in the cell when you stay close in 22, 21 hours per day, closed in your cell.

Jeremy: And looking in the recipes, most of the recipes to me seem kind of vaguely familiar to the sort of things I've seen elsewhere. But there are some that I thought extremely interesting, but a lot of them have some ingredients that I've found — because I didn't know anything about it — cream? Mozzarella? White wine, beer. How do they get these things?

Matteo: Yeah. Is it one of the questions that everybody say to me. Yeah. They have like an internal supermarket. It is not a supermarket, like in a classical way. When you go, you go there and you buy directly. So you receive money, they receive money, from outside, and you can spend this money in order to buy something from outside. Also, you need if you need a laptop computer or CD player or whatever you want. But also you can buy the list of food and things like, for personal hygiene, you know. Cleaning,, different products for cleaning the cell and toilet paper. And so once a week they make a list. They make a list of all of these things that they want to buy. There is someone, they collect all of these lists and the week after they receive all of the

products. But there are fresh products too. So there is fish. There is meat.

Jeremy: Not just meat. There's kid goat! Stuff. I can't get in my butcher.

Matteo: Yeah, it's true. Yeah. It was the third, maybe the third surprise for me, this. I published the list in the book for the first time, because the first time when I published the book in 2011, we didn't publish it. Now, I added this because I think it's important that from outside you really can read whatever, what you can buy.

Jeremy: One of the strangest recipes in there is, I think you call it an endless spaghettone.

Matteo: Yeah, yeah, it's an invention of one guy. Michelangelo. Actually he is out of the prison. I lost contact with him. But yeah, it's this way to make fresh pasta and then put in a plastic bottle, a small one, and they make an hole in the cap and after they smash this ... Because it was funny, because they called *infinito*, like infinite, because they say that it's a kind of metaphor of life sentences. Because most of them, they were life sentence prisoners and so *infinito*, it means that it never finished, like the sentence that they have. It is a bit bitter.

Jeremy: So it's basically just squeezing the pasta into boiling water.

Matteo: Squeezing the pasta directly into boiling water. Yeah.

Jeremy: Did you ever try it?

Matteo: No, I never tried it. I would like to.

Jeremy: Did you try any of the recipes?

Matteo: I tried some of them, but also ... My mother, she used this recipe book sometimes. It's working, so it's not fake?

Jeremy: I think we should explain that you don't have to use a plastic knife. You don't ... I mean, the invention side of it is also interesting. Turning a gas can into a grater for your cheese. That side of it is fascinating, too. But you don't have to use the equipment.

Matteo: No. You can use yours, of course. The publishers you saw ... There is divided ... We usually see, when usually look for a recipe book, we note that in recipe book, there is the list of ingredients and

the list and the explanation of the recipe. The characteristic of this recipe book is, beside the list of ingredients, you have the list of tools that you need, and they are the tools that they are using, of course. Because we decided, it was our decision to put that, because in all the recipe books that you have in your hand in the normal life, you never see a list of tools that you need because it's supposed that you have it in your kitchen. Your kitchen is supposed to be equipment like a four stars restaurant, you know? And if you want to try to make this recipe, of course it could be funnier if you try to make the same tools. It will be more difficult. You spend more than two hours in order to develop ... But coming back to your question, I use the recipe book, especially when I invite people to eat something in my studio. I have a kitchen in my studio. When I need something to eat in my studio. I prepared this recipe, the recipes from the book.

Jeremy: The list of tools, of all the tools that they make. I think the one that impressed me most was turning the bottom of a gas canister — because they cook with these gas stoves — turning the bottom of a gas canister into a kind of a grater for your cheese and what have you. What was the one that impressed you most?

Matteo: Oh, that is the one that is really strange. It's not, it's not maybe ... It was something because I found really strange, a tool — is also a grater for cheese — is take five plastic knife, broke the plastic knife, so take only the the part that is the cutting part. And they take a piece of wood ... Like that is unusual to have a piece of wood in your cell. But for some of them, they work in a wood workshop, they can find a way to have it. And they make like five holes or five lines, and they put these plastic knife there in order to have like a grater made by five plastic knives. It's something really strange. It's also, it's difficult to explain it, but it's working too.

Jeremy: Also, a lot of the recipes say that you should use the plastic laminate from the edge of your cupboard or something. You sharpen that and you use that as a knife.

Matteo: Yeah, it's really easy. It's broke this part of the table and use ...

Jeremy: You said that the way they get the ingredients from the, what, commissary, the families send them money. Maybe ... Do they also work in the prison to get money? What happens if somebody's not being sent money? Do they just ... They just can't do it. What?

Matteo: What I understood, that it was that this, for example, who can cook in prison, but not also cook, who can buy sometimes toilet paper, so basic things, are people that are in prison, and they have families outside that can help them economically. Because there are people in prison, actually, they really don't have money in order to buy, because there is no work in prison. And if there is some work possibility, work in prison, I think 15%, 20% of the prisoner population can have this access to the work. But also what's happened in this case, for example, with the people that I was working, they receive products from outside, so they receive products from ... almonds from Sicily and other different things from different parts of the regions. Especially in this period during Christmas times, there's a lot of ... So they are allowed to receive until 25 kilos of package from outside per month.

Jeremy: You've just been on a mini book tour in Chicago. Did you visit prisons in Chicago? Did you see the differences there? Were people interested in that?

Matteo: I didn't visit prison in Chicago. It was only for one week. But, one of the two presentations that I did of the book that was in — the presentation was mostly a debate, I did this debate with two ex-inmates, US inmates. One of them spent 42 years in prison. That is a lot. 42 years is a life, basically. And the debate was really interesting because they were continuously interested to understand how is the life in Italy. And they were surprised that they right to do this. And in my case, I was continued to ask it to them, how is in ... Of course, they have a lot of limitations compared to Italy. So they they were really surprised, and they said, someday I want to, if I want, if I come back in prison — I don't want to come back to prison — I want to go in Italy prison. So in some ways we were funnier. Of course, it was a funny moment for me to understand.

Jeremy: Did they find it as unbelievable as I found it when I read the book?

Matteo: Yeah, they found unbelievable things, they were really surprised. And I think is one of the reasons that the book is going so well in the United States, because my publisher say that, I'm surprised so the book is going so well, so I'm continuing to receive orders, and orders from different ... I was in three bookshops in Chicago in order to see the book, and I would like only to take a picture of the book

between other books, and three bookshops that I visited was sold out in less than ten days that it was out. So we were really surprised, me and the publisher. And I think one of the things is because, yes, of course, you really don't know that there is a something like that in Italian prison. And also because it, Italian kitchens and recipes, that it's supposed that they are famous in the world, you know.

Jeremy: Absolutely. I mean, I told somebody I was coming here to talk to you about prisoners, maximum security prisoners, cooking all the time. And they said, oh, that's so Italian.

Matteo: Yeah, it's Italian. So I think it's one of the reasons also because, the Italian penal system continues to maintain these kind of practices in cells that — they are quite dangerous because they have fire — so supposedly you can do whatever you want with the fire in your place. But I think it's so culturally important. The consequence if you take off the practices, could be worse than, you know ...

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