

# Eats: Chef Tom Juray cooks for (and with) the 'trustees' at the Androscoggin County Jail

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In many ways, Tom Juray faces the same challenges as most chefs — decisions about ordering, menu scheduling, equipment maintenance and the actual food preparation itself.

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Fifteen trays of veggie lasagna are made once every seven weeks. The lasagna feeds nearly 200 "trustees" and staff at the Androscoggin County Jail.



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Tom Juray, food director at the Androscoggin County Jail in Auburn, mixes the cheese for his veggie lasagna



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The veggie lasagna sauce includes, spinach, carrots, broccoli and has a little bit of a kick to it.



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Trustee James "Happy" Gilmore makes a cheese mixture of mozzarella and ricotta for the Androscoggin County Jail inmates' favorite meal, vegetable lasagna. The meal is only made once every seven weeks because of the cost of the ingredients. "It's a lot of cheese, and cheese is pricey" said Tom Juray, food director at the jail.



LAUREN SCHNEIDERMAN/SUN JOURNAL

Tom Juray, food director at the Androscoggin County Jail in Auburn, mixes the cheese mixture for his popular veggie lasagna.

What most chefs don't have is a captive audience or a staff comprised of mostly volunteers.

Juray is food director at the Androscoggin County Jail where, with the help of one full-time cook, one part-time cook and a dozen or so inmates, he prepares three meals a day for close to 200 inmates and staff. In the process, he accommodates a number of special dietary needs, measures ingredients in gallons instead of cups and has to lock up the pepper and count the knives.

Juray began his culinary journey early in life and traveled the country. "I grew up in restaurants. . . . I started as a dishwasher while still in high school," he says, and by his mid-20s had worked his way to chef in restaurants in Philadelphia, Chicago and places in between, including a stint at Yellowstone National Park with its multiple eateries.

Locally, Juray worked at Rolondeau's in Auburn. He began cooking at the Androscoggin County Jail in 1991 after Roland Nadeau of Rolondeau's Restaurant in Auburn recommended him for the then-vacant position. In July of this year, Juray will have been at the jail for 24 of the kitchen's 25-year history.

When he first arrived, Juray wasn't sure what to expect with "institutional cooking." The one thing he could be relatively certain of, however, was how many mouths he'd have to feed.

The inmates are referred to as "trustees," and "there are between 160 and 170 trustees at the jail at any given time, as well as 25 or more employees," says Juray, all of whom need to be fed.

Juray, who oversees three meals a day Monday through Friday, couldn't do it without help. While the "trustees don't do a lot of the cooking," he says the men are tasked with everything "from dicing vegetables to washing pots. . . . They don't mind wearing the hairnets, and there is a job list with daily and weekly cleaning chores to be done."

Juray added, proudly, "They do a heck of a job," noting that, for qualified trustees, every two days spent working in the kitchen reduces a trustee's jail sentence by one day.

The men that work in Juray's kitchen "are very well screened before they get down here," he says, noting, "I've visited most of the jails (in Maine) and many jails have knives tethered to the tables."

That's not necessary at the Androscoggin County Jail, he said, although some of the more potentially dangerous spices, like cayenne pepper, are stored under lock and key. As for knives, "We record who gets each blade, what time and the type — chef's, peeler, grinder, corer, etc. — and each gets signed in when they're finished."

Given the nature of life at the jail, turnover is high in the kitchen. "We're always training, training," says Juray. Despite that, some of the men earn Juray's trust, like James "Happy" Gilmore. "If you have someone that you can really trust, like Gilmore, you can give them special duties," says Juray, which lightens his load.

According to Gilmore, "Working in the kitchen is one of the best jobs at the jail. . . . I keep busy and the days go by quicker."

Juray arrives at the jail at about 5 in the morning. He gets the coffee started and then "calls the guys down at 5:30. We usually have 10 to 13 people working in the kitchen, depending on the day."

By 7:30, breakfast cleanup is finished and Juray and the trustees start preparing for lunch. Lunch at the jail is served at 11 a.m., and by 11:30 they start the cleanup.

After lunch, there's a little time off — more for the trustees — before they crank back up for the final meal of the day. "Dinner is served every day by 4:30. At 4:45, the trustees pick up the dirty trays and

by 5:30, 5:45 we're finished for the day," says Juray, noting that a number of things — such as lockdowns — can put them off schedule.

The most difficult part of his job, he says, "is the specialty meals . . . and there's a lot of them." For every meal, Juray needs to take into consideration not only allergies, but a host of other dietary and digestive considerations, including "weak bellies and the ability to chew."

"Being in jail is a stressful situation," he adds, with some trustees choosing not to eat for days after their arrival.

A dietitian approves all meals prepared in Juray's kitchen, and meals are prepared in accordance with a seven-week rotating schedule.

Menu items for breakfast include oatmeal and cereal, while lunch and dinner fare can include hot dogs and baked beans, corn chowder, fish sandwiches, shepherd's pie, meatloaf, chili and baked chicken with a sweet and sour sauce.

Although "meatball sub day is usually a hit, and we have hamburgers quite often," says Gilmore, the most popular meal by far is veggie lasagna, which is served only once every seven weeks.

"When you ask how much time they're serving (in jail), some (trustees) will say 'Three lasagnas and a wake-up.'" The "wake-up" being the day they go home, says Juray.

The veggie lasagna dinner, which is prepared without tomatoes or tomato sauce, "is the most expensive one I have," says Juray. "I can serve two cheeseburger meals for every one of these."

It takes five people to assemble the 12 to 15 giant trays of lasagna: "one on the pasta, one on the veggie-rich white sauce, one on the cheese, one on the breadcrumbs and one on the plastic wrap and foil," says Juray.

It also takes several days to make. The recipe requires 6.5 to 7 gallons of sauce, which "is so much easier to work with if it sets overnight," explains Juray. Furthermore, when they let the finished product set for a day "it gets richer."

For breakfast "we serve eggs twice a week," says Gilmore. He routinely helps scramble 350 eggs for each meal.

"Some (of the trustees) have never worked a day before — on the outside," says Juray. For them, the kitchen experience is job training, and "the ones that want to, do a really good job," says Juray.

“I’ve definitely become a better cook,” adds Gilmore.

When asked if he likes his job, Juray, who's also been working weekends lately because of a staff shortage, replies “I do!” with enthusiasm.

“In the restaurant business you answer to so many people.” Compared to that, says Juray, “This is almost like retirement.”