



Episode 47: The Great Ear Hustle Cook Off
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Rachael Nosin: This is Rachael Nosin, the greatest Ear Hustle listener of all time. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be suitable for all listeners. Discretion is advised.

Earlonne Woods: Are you votin'?

Christopher "Donut" Lewis: Nah, I ain't gonna vote.

Earlonne: Whatchu mean you ain't gonna vote? How you just gonna say all that shit and then say, "Nah, I ain't gonna vote"?

Donut: I ain't registered yet... [conversation fades out as Earlonne continues to insist]

Nigel Poor: Hey, Earlonne!

Earlonne: Waddup-er?

Nigel: You know what this is?

Earlonne: What?

Nigel: Okay. I'm super excited. This is our first ever Ear Hustle PSA, also known as a Public Service Announcement.

Earlonne: Fuck yeah, Nyge! [Nigel laughs] We're about to tell Ear Hustle listeners to vote.

Nigel: And E, this election is a big deal for you. You want to tell people why?

Earlonne: Yes. I just got off parole.

Nigel: In-fucking-credible.

Earlonne: You know, what's happened in this November, right?

Nigel: Tell me about it.

Earlonne: It will be the first time in my *whole* life I've been able to vote. So, when I found out my homeboy Donut wasn't registered, and he's been out five years and he just got off parole ten months ago.

Nigel: What'd you do?

Earlonne: I got on his ass about that shit. [Nigel laughs]

[to Donut]

I got off parole Wednesday. I registered that night.

Donut: How can I register? Then help me register.

Earlonne: I'mma give you the link right now. We finna register this fool. [Donut says, "register that" in the background] Man, indubitably.

[as narrator]

Nigel: You can go to [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov) to find out more about voting and to register. It takes five minutes.

Earlonne: Only five minutes. I just did the shit.

[in the field]

Alright, you a registered voter now, my brother.

Donut: Wussup.

Earlonne: Now you can go vote for who you gonna vote for – whoever that is – that's your preference.

Donut: 'Preciate that, man. It's always a blessing, man.

[as narrator]

Earlonne: Alright, let's get to this week's episode. [transition]

[in the field] Everybody pullin' out their stuff.

Nigel: You ready?

Earlonne: Do anybody need to do a wipe down? [In the background, "Yeah, I do."] Y'all ready? [Speaker in the background says, "yeah"] Five, four, three, two, two, one and a half.

Nigel: I think it's cook off time.

Earlonne: One! Alright, it's on y'all. [theme song comes in]

[as narrator]

It. Is. On.

Nigel: We have been waiting a long time for this, Earlonne.

Earlonne: We've been dreaming of this since Season One.

Nigel: The first annual...

Earlonne: Annual?

Nigel: Yeah, why not?

Earlonne: Alright.

Nigel: The first annual Ear Hustle Cook-off.

Earlonne: Four competitors.

Nigel: All former residents of California prisons

Earlonne: Bring their inside cooking skills, outside

Nigel: Four guys with years of experience cooking meals inside their prison cells

Earlonne: Using only stuff you can get your hands on in prison.

Nigel: They're gonna replicate those meals, outside.

Earlonne: And, we got a celebrity judge to help us pick a winner.

Nigel: Hot pots, ramen noodles.

Earlonne: Grit, determination, prison ingenuity.

Nigel: Uh, some under cooked fish?

Earlonne: You had to go there, Nyge?

Nigel: [giggles] You know, I did. I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlonne: And I'm the new voter on the block, Earlonne Woods. And this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [music fades out]

[in the field]

Nigel: We're in Oakland. We've got Jonathan, he's running away really quickly, like he doesn't want me to record him anymore.

[as narrator]

A few days before the contest, we went grocery shopping with two of our four contestants to collect some of the ingredients they'd need to make their meals.

Our first contestant, Jonathan Chiu, he was in San Quentin with you.

Earlonne: Yep, he was a cook in here. He used to get his cook on. Like on Saturdays while most guys were out in the yard, he'd stay in the cell cooking for himself and his cellie.

Nigel: So industrious.

Earlonne: Trip, he'd be in the back of his cell with his mattress rolled back and he use the bunk for cooking, right, [Nigel affirms] using his toilet as a seat, leaned over cutting and cooking on his bunk. [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: That is quite a visual.

Jonathan Chiu: I learned how to cook from my mom and when I was incarcerated, we all eatin' spreads and I'd be missing my own food. So, I found a way to actually just cook the food that I ate as a child.

Nigel: Jonathan mentions a spread. So, can you explain that please?

Earlonne: A spread is like when a group of guys come together, each one of them have some food, you know, you usually spread it out over a big table and get your grub on.

Nigel: And there's a lot of extracurricular cooking in prison, right? I mean, aside from those three meals that you get in chow. [both laugh] You can call them meals.

Earlonne: Yeah. That food sucks. In fact, some guys, if you a real baller, do not eat or step foot in the cafeteria at all.

Nigel: And like Chiu, a lot of guys have figured out how to turn their cells into kitchens. And of course, they've got tools. Chief among them is the hot pot.

Earlonne: Yeah. Like something you use for boiling water.

Nigel: But Earlonne, I've also heard rumors about George Foreman grills back there in the cells.

Earlonne: Shhh. I've used that grill.

Nigel: Really? [both laugh].

Earlonne: That George Foreman grill will get you fat. [Nigel laughs].

Nigel: You said it, not me. So, guys really perfect their cooking techniques. And then, they can show them off at the next spread.

Earlonne: And you do not want your reputation tarnished by making a bad spread.

Nigel: It's like a bad restaurant review.

Earlonne: It's a wrap. [Nigel laughs] [music comes in].

Nigel: So, for our first annual Ear Hustle Cook-off, each of our four contestants had \$30 to spend.

Earlonne: They can only buy things that would have been available to them in prison.

Nigel: So E, Let's talk about where incarcerated people get ingredients.

Earlonne: Well, there's a canteen...

Nigel: And the canteen is basically the store that's inside the prison where guys can shop, I think it's once a month?

Earlonne: Once a month, right. And you able to get your noodles, your rice, your meats, your pouches, your snack food.

Nigel: Or you can get things through packages. Items that are sent from the outside. A friend or family member can order food from a vendor and have that delivered to you. And packages happen four times a year.

Earlonne: Right. Quarterly. [Nigel affirms] Or maybe you had a friend or a hookup in the kitchen. Now that's the good shit.

Nigel: Oh yeah.

Earlonne: Like, *I don't like the way the chicken is prepared in the kitchen.* I'll get it raw from one of my partners that's a kitchen worker. [Nigel affirms] Then I can fry it. I can boil it. I can do whatever I want to do with it, you know what I'm sayin'?

Nigel: Yep. Yep. Yep. [music fades out].

[ambient noise inside supermarket - voices chattering, baby cries, shopping carts rolling around, groceries being rung up]

Earlonne: Now, back to our two contestants.

Nigel: The scene at Food Max was crazy. And Jonathan Chu, he's a gentle soul. He kept letting other folks take the shopping carts.

[to Jonathan].

I told you to get in there!

Jonathan: Well, it's a good thing we're not doing a supermarket sweep because I'd be losing.

Nigel: I know, I was just saying, what does this say about your competitive spirit?

Jonathan: I know, right?

Earlonne: While you putzing around by the shopping carts, Adam Garcia, one of the other contestants, was already in the aisles filling up his cart with ingredients for his special tamales.

Adam Garcia: Let's see, we got condiments. Here we go. Definitely gonna have to come down here.

Speaker 1: Gotta be with the parsley, man, it's got to be.

Adam: Down, down, down, down. So, let's see, I got my seasonings, I got that. I got the mixture. I got the beans. I got the rice.

Earlonne: He was budgeting.

Adam: So, so far, we're at \$20.85.

Earlonne: He was thinking strategically.

Adam: I know I'm going to need jalapeños, right? [Earlonne affirms] As well as the vinegar in here too.

Earlonne: Nyge, this dude came to win.

Nigel: Oh, clearly.

Adam: Because I have the best recipes in the world. So, prepare to be awed. You know my namesake is Awesome Adam. And everything I do awesomely. Nothing trumps awesome. So, that's why I'm going to win.

Earlonne: How's it going over there with Jonathan, Nyge?

Nigel: Ooh, busted. Busted. We got distracted talking about *The Great British Bake Off*.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Nigel: Do you love that show?

Jonathan: I love that show.

Nigel: I love it too, so much!

Jonathan: Everybody's so nice. Everybody's so helpful. Like, if one person fails, like they go on and help them.

Speaker 1: Alright, so we're at \$22.70, huh? Okay.

Adam: We're at \$ 22.70.

Earlonne: Twenty minutes after we got the food max, Awesome Adam was already checking out.

[self-check-out machine says, *use pin pad to complete transaction*]

Nigel: And nice, helpful British Bake-Off Jonathan, he's struggling.

Jonathan: I'm looking for my regular go-to. Nope, that's not it [Nigel says, "paprika?" in the background] Three, five, eight, ten, fifteen.

Nigel: \$15 and you only have four things?!

Adam: Five.

Jasmine Boxley: My name is Jasmine Boxley. And my loved one is located at Calipatria State Prison.

Jaycie Carrillo: So, my name is Jaycie Carrillo. [music comes in] My husband is currently incarcerated at Solano State Prison.

Emily Jarvis: My name is Emily Jarvis and my husband was incarcerated for thirteen and a half years.

Alesha Monteiro: My name is Alesha Monteiro. My husband, Anthony is serving time at California Medical Facility in Vacaville. And this is his most recent quarterly package list.

Jaycie: He loves seasoning 'cause he loves to cook. So, some of the seasonings that I purchased him is Mrs. Dash Southwest Chipotle seasoning, Mrs. Dash Fiesta Lime seasoning.

Emily: Pour ranch salad dressing packets, beef-flavored ramen, chicken-flavored ramen...

Jasmine: Forty pack of Hawaiian punch drink mix, two boxes of Fruit Rolls cereal, one box of Pop Tarts cereal...

Alesha: “Chicken Popcorn Ghost Pepper”. That's what it's called. [transition]

Earlonne: Out of all the guys I ever met in prison, [Nigel affirms] there's one who was at true cooking legend, Nyge.

Nigel: Oh yeah? Who's that?

Earlonne: Al King. What this guy can cook in his cell, you would not believe it.

Nigel: Like what?

Earlonne: So, it's this one meal he hooked up for me. [Nigel affirms] And it deals with Chinese sausages and egg noodles and sweet and sour sauce and onions...

Nigel: The expression on your face when you're talking about him, says it all.

Earlonne: I don't miss prison, but I do miss his food. [both laugh]

Al King: [over the phone] Well, a good dish that's simple to make is the clam linguini. It's my interpretation of clam linguini. You take the seashell pasta that you get 79 cents a bag. You boil it, strain it, throw it in a bowl, put some garlic powder, some salt and pepper. And then you put a couple of pouches of smoked clams in there with some white cheese. I prefer mozzarella, but provolone will do. And the hot pasta will melt the cheese and coat it. And then, just before you plate it, well, after you plate it up and serve it, you drizzle it with a little bit of a parmesan cheese and some extra virgin olive oil.

Earlonne: Did you come up with that one or you got that with off of a cook show?

Al: I watch Lidia, that Italian lady that comes on PBS and I saw her do it. And then when I see people on TV doing stuff, I look at what they're doing and how they're doing it. And then I say, *Oh, I could do that.* [music comes in] So, you know, I can't get the fresh clams. She has clams with the shells open. Well, I don't have that, but I can get in clams. And so, I can get pasta. I can get extra virgin olive oil. I can get mozzarella and provolone cheese and I can get Parmesan cheese. And I have salt and pepper and everything else. So, I interpret it and make it out of what's accessible to me. And it's very good. [music fades out]

[in the field, back at the cook off]

Earlonne: Everything is good, it seems. [seagulls squawking in the background]

[testing mic] Hello? [banter between cook off contestants, Nigel, and Earlonne]

Nigel: A few days later, we were ready to cook.

[in the field]

So, everybody, welcome to The Great Ear Hustle Cook Off! We're super excited about this. We've been talking about doing this for a while. So, thanks for participating. [clapping]

[as narrator]

We've met two of the contestants already, Awesome Adam and British Bake-off Jonathan. That leaves two more.

Earlonne: Yep. First up, Jason, aka "Turtle."

[in the field]

Next up is Jason. [Ear Hustle theme song comes in] [clapping continues]

Nigel: Give us a few adjectives to describe yourself.

Jason "Turtle" Samuel: I am joyful. I am very appreciative, and I am helpful.

Nigel: Okay. And you're gonna bring all that to your cooking?

Jason: Yes. [Nigel laughs]. And with a little love.

Earlonne: Listeners might remember Jason from the "Tell Christy I love Her" episode at the end of Season Four.

Nigel: In that story, he talked about this very unlikely friendship he has with a woman named Christy and her husband, Tom. And Christy, she can bake. So, Jason might be getting some good skills from her.

Earlonne: And that left one last contestant in our cook off. [clapping]

[in the field] And, last but never least– how did the producer get in the show?

Nigel: We're going to have to talk about that one.

Earlonne: Like, he was not on the roster. [Yahya laughs]

[as narrator]

Nigel: Ear Hustle producer and former resident of San Quentin, John "Yahya" Johnson.

Earlonne: The only thing I know he cooked in prison was oatmeal.

Nigel: You didn't read the *Bon Appétit* article?

Earlonne: No, I did not.

Nigel: So, this contestant has actually been featured in *Bon Appétit*, a foodie magazine for the recipe I believe he's going to cook today. So, he might have a competitive edge actually.

Earlonne: Still don't know how this dude got in there.

Nigel: Really, we had to spice things up.

Earlonne: Stir up the hot pot a bit, huh? [Nigel laughs]

Nigel: Exactly. Bringing our own special ringer.

Earlonne: And right from the get-go, Yahya set his sights on Awesome Adam. [music fades out]

Yahya: I see he got his camouflage on, his military fatigue. He's out for the hunt right now. But I'm not going down without a fight. And I think without a doubt that I'mma win this food competition 'cause I'm the best here.

Earlonne: Alright. Now let's kick this off. Where are we starting at, Nyge?

Nigel: Let me just describe the setup for everybody....

[as narrator]

Earlonne: We set up four tables in the parking lot in front of your studio down by the water in Hunter's Point, San Francisco.

Nigel: Yup. And Earlonne, we ran so many extension cords to power those hot pots. It was insane. [Earlonne affirms] And we all had to cross our fingers that we wouldn't blow fuses.

Earlonne: We should say a bit more about these hotpots, Nyge.

Nigel: Oh yeah, we wanted a very specific model.

Earlonne: Yes. The West Bend metal hot pot. [Nigel affirms] This used to be the kind of hot pot you could buy inside. They were the shit.

Nigel: At some point, the Corrections Department outlawed them. But if you had one, you could keep it.

Earlonne: Right. So, of course, they became super valuable. [Nigel affirms] Like you could probably sell one in there for like 300, 400 bucks.

Nigel: No shit?!

Earlonne: Hell yeah. So, everybody got a hot pot. A gallon of water, foil containers...

Nigel: A plastic bowl, plastic spoon, two serrated plastic knives, gloves, hand sanitizer, and plastic bags. [music comes in]

Earlonne: And with that, they were off. The fourth contestants had one hour to prep before our celebrity judge arrived.

[in the field]

While everybody putting their shit together, Adam is on the move.

Nigel: What are you doing, Adam?

Adam: Well, knowing that we had to be creative in trying to get masa...

Nigel: The real challenge of making a tamale in prison is getting that outer layer of corn to come out right cause masa, the corn flour, is pretty much unavailable.

[in the field]

Adam: Some people will do this dish while using potato chips. But what I found is that the potato chips, they break down easy, so it's more like a soft burrito. But, um...

Earlonne: And what Adam figured out is that with a lot of work...

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, it took him like an hour.

Earlonne: You can break tortillas down into a fine powder. But you still need another ingredient, a binding agent to get the crumbs to stick together.

Nigel: And Adam had to hustle for that too: ramen noodles.

[in the field]

Adam: What I find is, if I break up a soup into almost like powder-like consistency, and I add that to my mix, that is the starch that helps bind the masa to make it actually moveable.

Earlonne: Diesel.

Nigel: Yeah, right?

Earlonne: This dude know his stuff.

Adam: This was actually one of the last meals that I cooked before coming home. I knew that the week leading up to me going home, all my friends were going to be cooking for me and really showing their love. But I knew this was an opportunity for me to kind of just thank a lot of the people who were actually a part of me getting home.

Nigel: Yahya. Yahya was also looking pretty good.

Earlonne: Describe what you're making.

Yahya: So, what I'm making today is a curry pepper steak over rice dish. And I'm going to incorporate mushrooms, purple onions, jalapeños, fresh bell peppers. I'm going to make a curry gravy. It's going to have a sweet and sour consistency to it.

Earlonne: Something starting to smell good.

Nigel: When you were inside, what was the prize ingredient to get that was really hard to get?

Yahya: Fresh vegetables for me.

Nigel: So how did you get them?

Yahya: Out the kitchen. I had kitchen worker friends who worked there that would bring them back.

Nigel: And what could you get?

Yahya: Bell peppers, fresh jalapeños. On good days you can get garlic, raw garlic.

Nigel: Mmm

Yahya: And I love that. So, I used to make this inside. And one of the reasons why I did is because I had a nostalgic connection with the dish. When I was growing up, my mother loved cooking pepper steak. I love using red bell peppers because it makes the dish a lot more zestier. And then when you consider the drabness of prison society in and of itself – the concrete, the bars, and all of that different stuff – I wanted to make a more colorful dish in order to brighten up: one, my day, and other individuals who actually partook in the dish as well. [transition]

Donut: A real spread is multiple dishes. You know what I'm saying? Everybody got their own little recipe. Everybody got their own certain little thing. The way they mix up things.

Earlonne: This is Christopher Lewis, aka Donut. I met Christopher in 2011 at San Quentin.

Donut: We may have burritos. We gonna have a bean and chili and noodle dish. And then we're going to have a seafood dish for those that don't eat meat. And the seafood will consist of tuna, oysters, mackerel. I don't eat pickles, you know, and I remember one day I gave Baby Rock, like 20, \$30 one day. This nigga made a spread one time and pickles was all on the top of the motherfucker and destroyed my whole meal. And I never wanted to eat with him again. I'm serious.

Earlonne: I remember that shit. And he didn't care. He was pissed.

Donut: And I just knew he knew I didn't eat that shit, homie. And he wasn't gonna put that shit up in there, but he put that shit up in there anyway and killed my whole meal. I put like \$30 in that shit, homie, just on the strength.

[in the field]

Earlonne: And Chiuky Chiu. So, what are you making today?

Jonathan: I was making dumplings because that's actually what my mom used to make for me as a child. So– and it would be a whole day thing too. When I went to prison, basically, what they serve you is pretty much American food or what they think is also Chinese food or Mexican food, whatever. And because I learned how to cook from my mom, I figured I can bring my own thing and I can share my food with people. And that's my expression of showing that I care.

Earlonne: Chiu's cooking skills were solid.

Nigel: So, we're looking at a bowl and in it are our three plastic bags that are tied very neatly, like a little topknot on it.

Earlonne: Nyge, [Nigel affirms] we should explain the all-important plastic bag.

Nigel: Oh yeah. A key component of prison cooking.

Earlonne: You know how in society you have a lot of bowls and pots and pans. [Nigel affirms] Well, on the inside, you don't have that stuff. So, you use plastic bags for food, pruno, and other shit. [Nigel laughs].

Nigel: We gotta talk about the pruno someday. Maybe not today.

Earlonne: Another episode.

[in the field]

Nigel: One is filled with mushrooms and maybe oil?

Jonathan: Mushrooms and water, just rehydrate them.

Nigel: And water.

Jonathan: Because I bought some dried mushrooms and I'm rehydrating them. That's the prep time. This is— the other bag is fungus. It's black fungus, Chinese, I guess, delicacy. And I'm rehydrating both of them.

Nigel: Okay.

Jonathan: So that I can cook with it later.

Nigel: And then tell us about your spice rack here.

Jonathan: Spices that I have is I have my soy sauce, hoisin, pepper, because Chinese sauces already has a lot of salt in it, so I really don't need it. Plus, the soy sauce already has salt. I have paprika and cayenne pepper and garlic pepper. [Nigel affirms] And I have some Mama noodles here with extra seasoning.

Nigel: Wow. I do really like this bagging technique.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Nigel: It looks beautiful.

Jonathan: Thank you.

Earlonne: Wait a minute, Jonathan Chiu is sounding a little more confident than he did in the grocery store.

Nigel: Oh yeah. I was starting to think that this whole nice guy British bake-off thing was really just an act.

Earlonne: A bluff?

Nigel: We'll see.

[in the field]

Chiu, what are you doing?

Jonathan: Uh, what am I doing?

Nigel: Are you modifying that hot pot?

Jonathan: Maybe? [laughter in the background]

Earlonne: Nyge, [Nigel affirms] This is one of the reasons that incarcerated people love these old school hotpots: they're really easy to modify.

Nigel: Yup. There's a regulator in there and its job is to make sure the hot pot turns off when it hits a certain temperature. But, if you know how to remove it, you can keep things cooking in there as long as you want.

Earlonne: Yeah. I knew a guy who could cook a whole chicken, like fry up a chicken.

Nigel: Wow.

Earlonne: Deep fry. So yeah, those things were good.

[in the field]

Nigel: Do you have the skills for this?

Jonathan: I do.

Yahya: This is called jailbreaking an appliance.

Nigel: This is called a "work around." He just took the bottom of the hot pot off. And—oh, no, he's using the can opener.

Earlonne: Alright, let's go to the dude that's finished. [everyone laughs]

[as narrator]

Everyone else is still getting set up. And Jason, despite his nickname "Turtle," it looks like he's already finished.

[in the field]

An instant meal. [Nigel and Jason laugh]

Nigel: What is left for him to do is just actually put the fish in the rice.

Jason: Yeah, the fish and the condiments. Well, I got a little bit of mayonnaise. I already— and I got the shrimp flavored noodles.

Nigel: It seemed like he was really embracing that cooking philosophy of just throwing things together and seeing how it comes out.

Earlonne: I tried to give him some pointers, Nyge. I did.

Nigel: You did, no doubt.

[in the field]

Okay.

Earlonne: Don't you gotta do some stirring before that stuff burn?

Jason: I just put it in there.

Earlonne: You gotta break the rice chunks down and all kinda stuff. [Nigel commenting inaudibly in the background and laughing] Like, bro, I'm trying to help you.

Nigel: Is that fish cooked enough?

Jason: I don't know, we gone find out. The chef gone tell me. [transition]

Earlonne: While we wait for Jason to figure out his fish problem, I want to introduce you to the homie Larry Davis. He's locked up in Tracy. And he was telling me about this competition one of the package companies – those vendors that supply food to incarcerated people – was running for the best prison recipe.

Nigel: Oh, interesting.

Larry Davis: So, in my mind, I had this idea of what I thought would be scrumptious, right? I said, *man, if I could come up with a creation, nobody ever thought about, I know I can win this contest.*

Earlonne: So, Larry gets an idea. And it involves ice cream cones.

Larry: They have two kind of ice cream cones. They have the sugar cones and then they have the regular cones that we used to get ice cream scoops with the little bitty

one. [music comes in] So, I ordered oysters, clams, brown rice, and Dorito, potato chips, mayonnaise and Cheeze Squeeze, and jalapeño peppers.

Nigel: Oh my god, E. Where is this going?

Earlonne: My friend Larry mixes all this stuff together.

Nigel: No, no, no, no.

Larry: I let it set for about two hours until it got kinda soft.

Earlonne: Wait a minute, wait a minute. You scooped spread up and put 'em in ice cream cones?

Larry: In ice cream cones. And you know how you eat an ice cream? [Earlonne affirms] Instead of eating ice cream, you was eating the spread in the ice cream cone. [music fades out]

[transition] [in the field] [Nigel says in the background, "This is Bruce, our producer," followed by greetings]

Nigel: An hour later. Our celebrity judge arrived.

Gilbert Pilgrim: My name is Gilbert Pilgrim and I am a professional cook. Both my mother and grandmother were very, very good cooks. And I grew up in Mexico City. The meal was always a very important thing. We all had to be at the table and we ate together all the time. It was nothing fancy, but it was always homemade.

Nigel: Gilbert got his start as the first intern at Chez Panisse, the restaurant where California cuisine really started back in the seventies.

Earlonne: He's now owner and Executive Chef at Zuni Cafe.

Nigel: Zuni is such a classic San Francisco restaurant. It's the first like in quotes, "fancy restaurant" I ate at when I moved to San Francisco in 1991. They have the best chicken and they still have it. We gotta go there sometime.

Earlonne: Gilbert walked around and met the contestants. And Awesome Adam leading the pack, showed off how in prison he would chop up vegetables using the lid of a tin can.

Adam: I find that, trying to use these plastic knives, there's no way that you'll be able to cut these vegetables that fine. So, we're able to get canned goods in prison. So, I found that using the top of the lid to cut any vegetable or cheese, anything, it just slices it like butter.

Nigel: But I mean, really, he worked like an hour– maybe, at least an hour and a half just getting stuff down to then reconstitute it.

Gilbert: But in terms of the time that it takes, we've been brainwashed to think that cooking is a chore. That it should take no time, that it should be immediate. But there is so much gratification when– like, I love doing fava beans, which you have the first pod and the second pod– because it calms you down. [Adam affirms] And a lot of people spend more time taking care of their car than they do taking care of their food that goes into their bodies.

Adam: Yeah. It's very tranquil just going through the whole process because it allowed me in my own little time and space in my head to just kind of zone out. And the cooking process for me used to be like therapeutic. [Gilbert affirms]

Gilbert: Have you worked in a professional kitchen?

Adam: Never.

Gilbert: Because, you know, when everything is working well, it's such a beautiful thing to see just in the quietness of focus.

Nigel: So, it's not all hectic and people yelling? [laughs] Not in my kitchen, no.

Earlonne: So there's no Chef Ramsey?

Gilberto: No. Chef Gilberto.

[as narrator]

Nigel: I can see that there would be some therapeutic qualities to focusing on something like cooking when you're inside.

Earlonne: Probably for some people.

Nigel: Where– was your therapy in the eating and not the cooking?

Earlonne: Of course. [Nigel laughs] Nyge, do you see this gut?

Nigel: And just like on the outside, a shared homemade meal in a prison can really bring people together.

Earlonne: Right. And Yahya had a story about that.

Yahya: There was a time at San Quentin when there was a lot of drum on the yard. [music comes in]

You had several individuals on the yard who didn't like the state of affairs, right. People weren't getting along. People weren't talking to each other. And so their whole thing was to invite people to a spread to have what we call a "unity spread." They started planning. They started putting out the little *communi-cees*, the little kites and the word of mouth. And so, it started spreading like wildfires. What the unity spread consisted of was a potluck, so to speak. So, you have burritos, noodles, oysters, cheese. You had all kinds of different things. Some guys may even brought tacos out. But, you know, it was like maybe ten or fifteen tacos, but it might've been forty or fifty people. So, you know, people split those in half and that was also a part of the comradery and the fellowship. We bridged a lot of gaps that day. I found out just by sitting here and having this spread, that one person didn't like one person because he didn't speak to him one day. And it was merely because this person didn't see him. But because he had this perspective about this guy not liking him, he assumed something. I left that spread feeling like I was closer to a lot of individuals that I wasn't traditionally close to. And it was really powerful. [music fades out]

Nigel: So, spreads inside prison can help people resolve their differences and create community.

Earlonne: Right. [music comes in] But this spread on the outside, this spread is a cutthroat affair. [Nigel affirms] There will be winners and there will be losers. That's coming up after the break.

Jaycie: One of the odd things that I've purchased was dragonfly dehydrated cucumbers. And when I asked him what he used that for, he says he used it to make like stir-fries and things like that.

Alesha: Mashed potatoes. He has the garlic cheddar kind. Five hostess jumbo muffins – banana and blueberry. And I added B-complex on the list because of corona. And that's it. [music fades out]

Nigel: [music comes in] So, E, at this point, you and Gilbert and I had walked around, we looked at all the food. What was going through your head?

Earlonne: I was thinking that Yahya was a real contender. I mean, his presentation was looking cool.

Nigel: Oh yeah. He was actually surprising me.

Earlonne: Definitely. He came with some old school hotpot tricks. Adam, his shit looked like it can be served in a restaurant or served in the tamale spot right now.

Nigel: I mean, as you say, he is on point.

Earlonne He's on point. Jonathan, he went through some topsy turvy type [both laugh] situations a little bit earlier. But, he's coming back. And Jason.

Nigel: Yeah. We're crossing our fingers for Jason.

Earlonne: Since there could only be one winner in the first annual Ear Hustle Cook Off, we were going to have to make some hard decisions.

Nigel: So, you, me and Gilbert went inside to huddle. [music fades out]

[in the field]

First of all, what are some of your impressions?

Gilbert: I'm very impressed, really. The thing that concerns me is that there has to be one winner.

Earlonne: That shouldn't concern you.

Nigel: I hate that too. But there is one dish I do not want to eat.

Earlonne Nobody wanna eat Turtle dish.

Nigel: [quietly] It's horrible

Earlonne: Just say it.

Nigel: [quietly] It looks horrible.

Earlonne: Say it.

Nigel: I'm also just worried the fish is not cooked.

Earlonne: The fish was still swimming in that shit.

Gilbert: Yeah, the fish doesn't look cooked.

Earlonne: So, I'm glad– let's pick a straw and see who gone test– who gone taste that one first. I just turned into a vegetarian, so... [Nigel laughs]

[music comes in]

Nigel: We had to talk to Jason.

[in the field]

Earlonne: So, come on over here, bro. We got a suggestion.

Jason: [on the phone] Lemme call you back.

Earlonne: Yeah. Call her back.

Gilbert: Is that your agent?

Earlonne: No, that was his lawyer. That's his lawyer about this meal. [all laugh] So, here's our issue. [music fades out] Your fish is not, um, cooked all the way. So, our request is, can you put it in a plastic bag and throw it in one of the buckets so it can cook more?

Jason: Yeah. [music comes in]

Speaker: Plating has begun. The presentation is happening.

Earlonne: Nyge. [Nigel affirms] The food is ready.

Nigel: I am so excited. And first up. Yahya.

[in the field]

It smells really good. And I like the color. [Gilberto affirms]

Yahya: The rice is very good because you were not happy with the rice, but it's... because it was minute rice, it didn't have the starch in it to hold the gravy.

Nigel: Wow, there's a nice sweetness to it.

Yahya: Yeah. Yeah.

Nigel: What is that?

Yahya: Secrets, trade secrets.

Nigel: Yahya, I think this is delicious.

Gilbert: I think I just saw your secret. [Yahya laughs]

Yahya: Maybe, maybe. Maybe this secret was love.

Nigel: Yup.

Gilberto: Yup.

Yahya: Yeah, absolutely. Brown sugar, for sure.

Nigel: I thought Yahya's dish turned out pretty good.

Earlonne: Yeah. But the man to beat was over at the next table. Awesome Adam.

[in the field]

Nigel: Okay. First of all, the appearance is really wonderful. There's garnishes on everything and he added a little color. There's a little red on the rice. The texture on the tamale looks beautiful. So, really professional.

Earlonne: Yeah. It looks, uh, as a matter of fact, I'm gonna put the mic down. We finna get into this. [all laugh]

Nigel: So, I was really getting excited for Jonathan Chiu's dumplings.

Earlonne: But he had run into some technical difficulties.

Jonathan: I was gonna make dumplings. And generally, I have to let it sit so it can prove, and then it could build structure. But my dough is not building enough structure. So, it's falling apart when I did my test one.

Nigel: Is it over kneaded?

Jonathan: Oh no, no, no. There's— no, I have to actually put a lot of kneading into it. But I might have to start over.

Nigel: I'm just trying to channel the British bake-off to figure out what's going on...

[as narrator]

But, Chiu pulled out some good old fashioned prison ingenuity.

Earlonne: An Ear Hustle classic. The work around.

Jonathan: Mama noodles with a side of zucchini and onion. And then my main protein is Chinese sausage and there's some mushrooms. And some fungus.

Nigel: That's good! It definitely has a little spicy.

Earlonne: Nigel went back for a second fork of Jonathan Chiu's.

Nigel: A little salty.

Jonathan: A little salty.

Nigel: A little salty.

[as narrator]

That left one last dish. And Earlonne, I wanted to be polite, so I let you go first.

Earlonne: Polite, huh? [both laugh] Yep. We still had Jason's fish dish.

Jason: So, I have jalapeños, jambalaya, and I have salmon.

Nigel: Salmon, okay.

Earlone: My name is Earlone Woods and I leave everything to Nigel. [Jason and Earlone laugh] He already took his Pepto-Bismol. [Jason and Earlone laugh]

Gilberto: I'm Mexican. I don't need to take Pepto-Bismol.

Earlone: All the time.

Gilberto: I was born with Pepto-Bismol. [all laugh]

Earlone: Alright, judges.

Nigel: Okay. We're gonna go deliberate.

Earlone: Y'all have fun. Y'all enjoy. We'll be back.

Nigel: And you guys should enjoy. Eat away.

Jason: Eat away-hey-hey! [music comes in]

Nigel: I'm happy to say as our presence here today attests, the judges survived.

Earlone: We decided to give points based on taste, presentation, and creativity. The most you can give for each was four points.

Gilberto: Yahya, for taste, a four. Appearance, three. Creativity, four.

Earlone: Ooh. Y'all generous.

Nigel: I know, I was too high.

[as narrator]

Earlone, you were not that generous.

Earlone: I gave Jason on taste, I gave him a one. Appearance, I gave him a zero. I should have gave him a minus one. [Nigel and Gilberto laugh] Creativity, I gave him a half a point.

Nigel: I gotta say, though, if we're giving a spirit award, Jason would be a contender because he was smiling and laughing the entire time.

Earlone: Jonathan Chiu got awarded bonus points for scrambling to find a work around when his dumplings didn't work out.

Gilberto: Adam, I gave him fours in all of them.

Earlone: Yeah, I think if he could have put it in a corn husk thing and been able to heat it up like that... [Nigel affirms]

Gilberto: If we had brought mariachis...bring margaritas...and I would have *sang La Cucaracha* [everyone chattering and laughing]

Earlone: Alright, here we go. So...

[as narrator]

First, the judges approached, John Yahya Johnson.

Gilberto: You know, the bringing the food to your mom for me was very, very special because that is also the reason of why I got into cooking. And that keeping onto that memory is very important.

Nigel: Yahya, I really liked watching you cook and how careful you were chopping everything. I really enjoyed that you thought about color. And I loved that the dish had that sweetness to it. And then also a nice bite to it. So it was a really good surprise for me. Thank you.

Earlone: I'll say this, roast beef was like one of my things in prison because it was like a [undistinguishable]— how much was roast beef a can? Three, four dollars?

Contestant: Four dollars

Earlone: Four dollars, so this is like one of those luxury items, but I would definitely say that that was one of those meals that do remind me of prison. So, it was a little prison nostalgic and I don't know if that's good or bad.

Yahya: That's awesome. [music comes in]

Gilberto: I thought the tamales were very good. And the ingenuity of coming up with a method of producing the masa, my grandmother would have been very proud of that. Jonathan, your ingenuity in coming up with a new dish after the first one didn't work is what life is all about, and it is what cooking is all about. And, it came out very, very tasty.

Nigel: I again also liked watching you preparing all the vegetables. I thought you chopped everything nicely. The dish tasted delicious to me. Like I said, a little salty, but I went back and had quite a few tastes. So, nicely done.

Gilberto: Jason, I thought that you took criticism when you were doing your prep very, very well, which as a chef at a restaurant is very nice to see. And the final combination of flavors was very good though a little too mashed up together. [Jason affirms]

Earlone: Bruh. I'm speechless.

Jason: Is that good? Is that good? [all laugh] [music fades out]

[as narrator]

And then the moment of truth.

Earlone: Each one was standing behind their table and each one was looking at us, like, *pick me, pick me*.

[in the field]

So, drum roll, please. [Nigel makes a high-pitched trilling sound while others drum on hard surfaces]

The winner of this contest started off when he first was asked to join, said he was gonna win. [theme comes in] And Adam, you are the winner of the Ear Hustle first food cook off. [someone goes, "womp, womp, womp"] Womp, womp womp? Wait a minute. [all clapping] With that, do you have anything to say?

Adam: First of all, I want to thank Ear Hustle for allowing me to showcase my skills. You know, I'll be happy to share the recipe with anybody inside. It's a great recipe and I hope you guys find the same joy and happiness in preparing it that it brings me.

Earlone: Definitely. Thank you... Guest judge?

Gilberto: I was very honored to be with you. I thank you all for your generosity, especially in this difficult times with COVID and now with the fires. It is very refreshing and very inspiring to see people in difficult circumstances come together and do something for good. So, thank you.

Earlone: Indeed. Appreciate it.

Alesha: If I could add one more thing to the list, it would probably be steak, like a nice, big juicy steak.

Emily: Fresh vegetables, and actual meat, like real chicken, real steak.

Jaycie: Fresh meat. That would be like a huge thing that I want to do for him.

Jasmine: Maybe like a napkin with my kiss imprint. And maybe like has a little bit of perfume in it, just so that, you know, when he sees that napkin, it's symbol of love. [music fades out]

Nigel: So maybe next year when the pandemic is over and we can go back in and visit our friends in San Quentin again, we'll do the second annual cook off inside.

Earlonne: In the meantime, though, we did want to check in with our co-host on inside Rahsaan, "New York" Thomas.

Nigel: He was so excited to tell us about this new pizza recipe he'd been working on.

New York: [over the phone] Pizza crust. And so, I get tomatoes when they give it to us in the morning and I boil the tomatoes until the skin busts open. And then I cool them off and mash them up. And I put them inside a chili with no beans with a shredded beef. I put that in the hot pot and let that marinate. And that's my sauce. Then I take the hot pot and I turn the strainer upside down. I put the crust on top of the strainer. I put the sauce on top, you know, the tomato chili and shredded beef sauce. I put mozzarella cheese and then I put on it chopped up sausage sliced like pepperoni. So, they beef sausages. And then I take the top of the hot pot and I use that to make the steam melt the cheese. And it's freaking delicious.

Nigel: Did you invent that recipe?

New York: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I got the pizza crust by mistake in a package one time and I was like, *what the hell I do with this?* And it just came together. And then one day I was trying to melt the cheese and it just wouldn't melt right. And then I figured out [automated voice interrupts, *this call and your telephone number will be monitored and recorded*] that if I take the top of the hotpot and cover the snout and the pizza with it, it would cause the steam to go and melt the cheese real nice. Make the crust nice and soft. It is good.

Nigel: That's New York style pizza. [both laugh]

New York: Yup, I never thought of it like that, but it actually is New York style pizza. [music comes in]

Jonathan: Ear Hustle would like to thank Jason Samuel, Jonathan Chiu, Adam Garcia, and yes, even Ear Hustle's producer, John "Yahya" Johnson for participating in the first annual year.

Nigel: Big thanks to guest judge, Gilbert Pilgrim from Zuni Cafe in San Francisco. And also thanks and lots of love to Davia Nelson who put the show in touch with Gilbert. Davia is the co-host of the wonderful Kitchen Sisters podcast and our partners in Radiotopia.

Earlonne: And one more big thanks to friend of the show, Alesha Monteiro.

Gilberto: Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

Adam: This episode was sound designed and engineered by Earlonne Woods and Antwan Williams with music by Antwan, David Jassy, and Rhashiyd Zinnamon

Gilberto: Amy Standen edits the show and Julie Shapiro is Executive Producer for Radiotopia. Ear Hustle would like to thank his acting warden Ron Broomfield. And as, you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here.

Lieutenant Sam Robinson: This is Lieutenant Sam Robinson, the Public Information Officer at San Quentin State Prison. And I've had the opportunity or the privilege to witness many a cook off or potlucks inside of the prison, especially down in the newsroom where Jonathan Chu and y'all both work. And I don't remember either of those guys really being involved. So, I don't know if Adam went up San Quentin's best when he won this last contest. Uh, definitely in the future when things are better, we'll have to replay this again. Anyway, with that, I will say I approve this episode.

Adam: This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg initiative, working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

Nigel: Thanks, you two.

Earlonne: Good looking.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Hear more at radiotopia.fm.

Nigel and Earlonne: Peace. [in tandem] [music fades out]

Earlonne: So, what'd you call it though? [laughing]

Larry: Shit, I called it "The Ice Cream Cone." You gotta give it a name, *shit*.

END OF EPISODE.