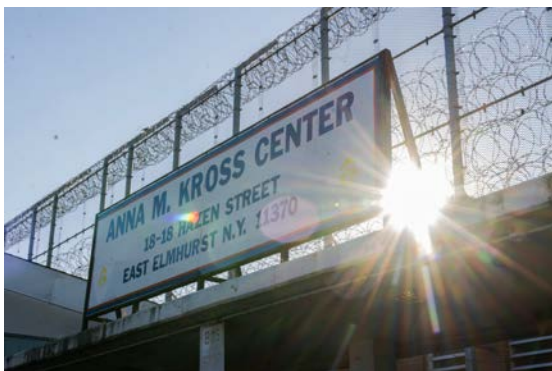




Dull Knives, Critical Jobs: Inside a Rikers Island Kitchen





As New York City's troubled jail complex tries to improve its food, the people who cook there see a higher mission.



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By Priya Krishna Photographs by Brittainy Newman

Priya Krishna and Brittainy Newman twice visited Rikers Island, where they were granted extensive access to a kitchen, its cooks and the detainees who assist them.

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Luis Reina was preparing dinner for a crowd: turkey stew, rice and cucumber salad. The recipes were simple — chop the vegetables, brown the meat — but the process was anything but straightforward.

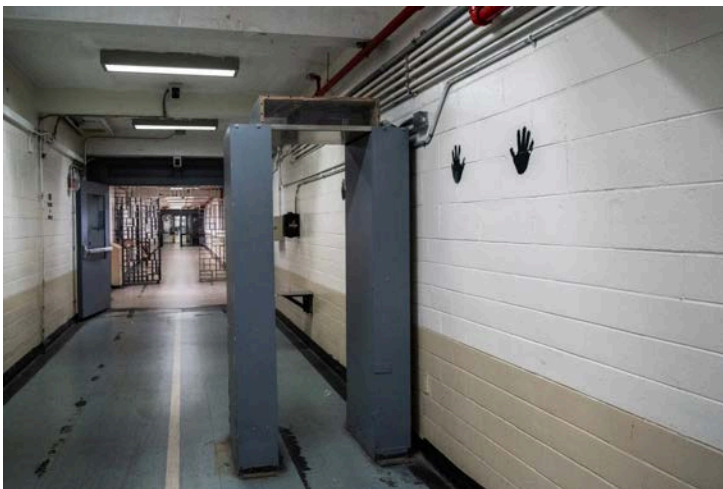
Each box of ingredients had to be searched for contraband. The knife was tethered to the counter by a sturdy chain, and the metal spoons came from a cabinet flanked by security guards. The sharp-edged lids from tomato cans had to be tossed into a trash can inside a locked cage. Several kitchen assistants were clad in jumpsuits and carefully patted down before they could start work on the meal — for 3,800 people.

Mr. Reina, 56, is a cook on Rikers Island, New York City's notorious 415-acre jail complex in Queens. He commutes two hours from Flatbush, Brooklyn, to prepare meals for the jail population and staff alongside roughly 50 other cooks in the

larger of two kitchens on the island.



One of two kitchens on Rikers Island. It operates around the clock, and the cooks prepare every breakfast, lunch and dinner for detainees.



The long walk to the kitchen at the Anna M. Kross Center requires passing through several gates and a metal detector.



Some detainees, all nonviolent offenders, work in the Rikers kitchens and earn an hourly wage of \$1.45.

He says he's frustrated by the poor quality of the meals, in which every ingredient and recipe is dictated by the Mayor's Office of Food Policy. Most vegetables and fruit arrive at the jail canned or frozen. Salt is off the table, banned since 2014 for health reasons.

"People say the food on Rikers Island is nasty, and they are looking at the cooks," Mr. Reina said. "I only cook what I was told to cook."

But the food is getting its most significant overhaul in roughly 15 years. A year ago, the city received a \$100,000 grant from the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, a group fighting climate change, to develop plant-based recipes for Rikers and retrain its cooks. The old menu "was heavy on carbs and heavy on processing," said Lynelle Maginley-Liddie, commissioner of the city's Department of Correction.

This new program — which doesn't eliminate meat but incorporates more vegetable dishes like chana masala and spinach artichoke pasta — is a personal mission for Mayor Eric Adams, who has directed the city's hospitals and schools to offer more plant-based meals (to mixed reviews).



“People say the food on Rikers Island is nasty, and they are looking at the cooks. I only cook what I was told to cook.”

Luis Reina

Rikers, of course, isn't just any city institution. Housing roughly 6,600 adults, most awaiting trial and others serving sentences of less than a year, the jail has come under decades of scrutiny for inhumane conditions and uncontrolled violence. A federal judge recently held the city in contempt for failing to address these problems, which may lead to a takeover of Rikers by a federal court. The city faces a deadline to close the jail by August 2027 and replace it with four smaller centers — a legal mandate it is unlikely to meet.

In the meantime, the Rikers kitchen never sleeps. And a menu overhaul won't relieve the rigors of the cooks' work — eight-hour shifts confined behind a long series of locked doors, for a starting annual salary of \$38,858.

Theirs can be a strange experience: Although the cooks said they don't feel in danger, the specter of violence still hangs over the complex. While they work with some detainees, they never see most of the people they feed.



Many cooking utensils are kept in locked cabinets, and the kitchen is monitored by security cameras.

Yet several cooks The New York Times interviewed on the job said they saw the work as a chance to make a difference in the lives of the detainees, providing them a rare reminder of their humanity: a meal.

“We become more trustworthy because of the food,” said Mr. Reina, a cheerful man with an understated swagger who has cooked at Rikers for 29 years. “Because they want to eat better.”

His job involves much more than cooking — he considers himself a therapist, instructor and mentor for the detainees who help in the kitchen. He never asks them what they did to end up at Rikers.

“Anybody could be on the other side of that fence,” he said. “I don’t judge.”

A co-worker, Tamara Craddock, said mealtimes are “the only connection the guys have to staying sane.” Food isn’t just humanizing, she said, but stabilizing; if there were shortages, there would be riots.

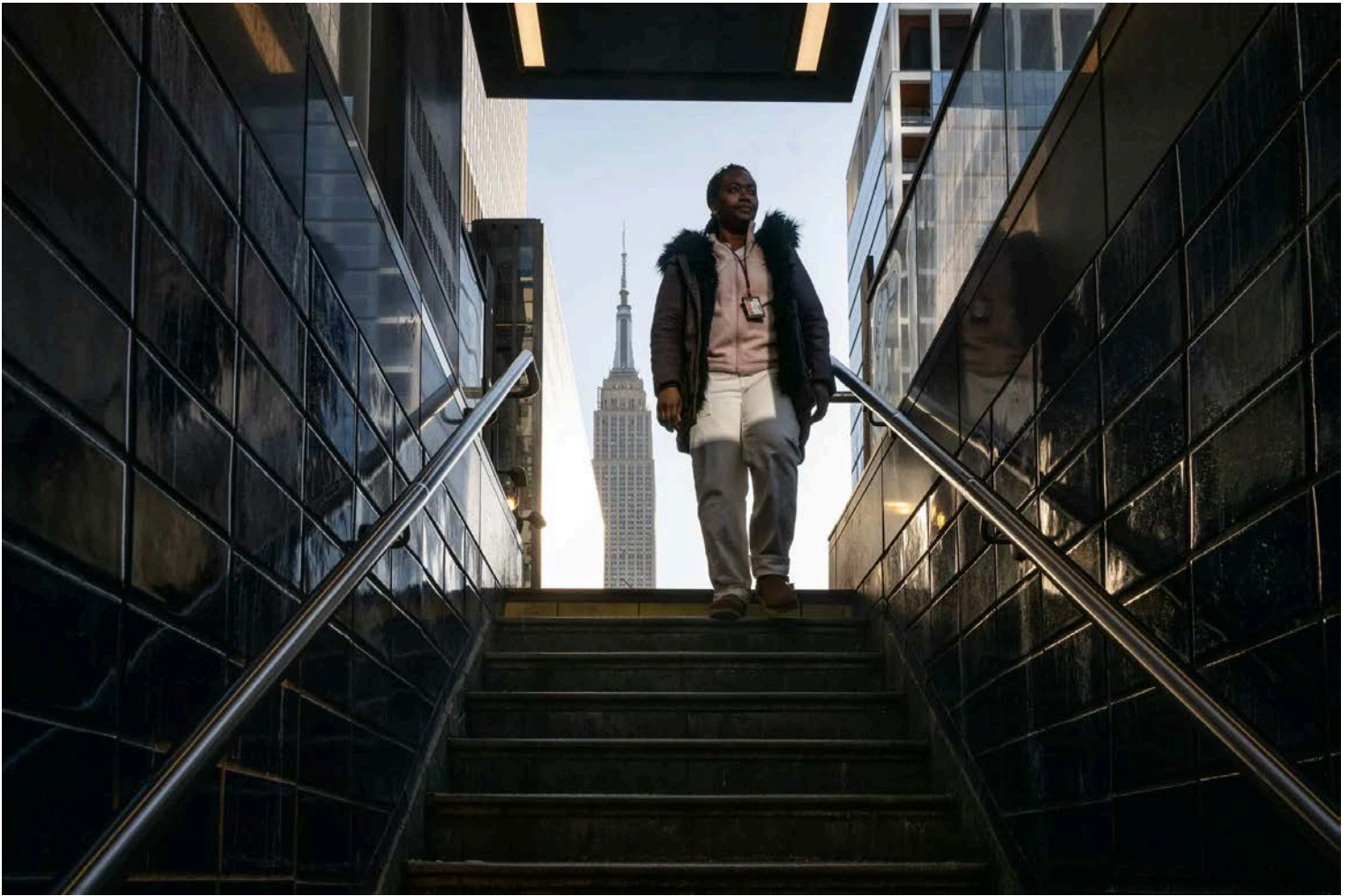
‘At First It Is Terrifying’

Ms. Craddock, an immigrant from Guyana who commutes in from Flatbush, Brooklyn, recalled the day four years ago when she first arrived for work. She dropped her belongings in a locker, passed through a metal detector and made the long walk to the kitchen as gate after gate slammed behind her.

“At first it is terrifying, coming into it,” she said. During training, the cooks are told what to expect, but “actually experiencing it, it is different.”

She had left a career in restaurants for the stabler hours, health benefits and pension of a government job. She soon realized that the detainees she worked alongside were like any other co-workers. “I am a people person,” said Ms. Craddock, 38. “I try my best to respect the guys, and they return that respect.”

She cheers them up if they get bad news at a court hearing. To spice up their meals, she mixes ketchup and jelly to improvise a barbecue sauce. “I want them to have a good day,” she said. “And they come in and say, ‘Good morning! Hi Ms. Craddock.’ They have a big old smile on their face.”



Tamara Craddock, a Rikers cook, commutes two hours each way to work every morning.

She can't share too much: the cooks typically go by only their last names and don't discuss their personal lives with detainees, for safety reasons. "You can't get too comfortable, because somebody could tell you a real story and you're feeling sorry for them, and they might ask you to bring stuff in, like contraband," she said. Above all, "you have to not show any fear."

The atmosphere can feel constricting, said Kay Fraser, who came to Rikers 18 years ago after working as a pastry cook in a place that seems a world away: the American Girl Place doll store in Midtown Manhattan.

"I always say we are 'out-carcerated,'" said Ms. Fraser, who sometimes drives to work from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, with her daughter, an officer at Rikers. "We come and go as we please but at work, we are locked in."

Ms. Fraser, 62, takes a tough-love approach with detainees. “I tell them, ‘I am not your friend, I am not your mother, sister, no relative of yours,’” she said. “I am here to do a job to the best of my ability and to help you in your corrective measures.”

If one of them lands back in Rikers after being released, “I say, ‘Is your name engraved on a bed or a cot in here?’”



“I always say we are ‘out-carcerated,’ We come and go as we please but at work, we are locked in.”

Kay Fraser

A Menu in Progress

The cooks are excited about the menu overhaul because it involves actual cooking. These days, much of their time is still spent defrosting packaged foods, like burritos and pizza pockets, that they know detainees don't like.

"The wagons come back full," said Janelle Anderson, a Rikers cook for 10 years. "The majority of the food is going in the garbage."

The kitchen lies deep within the Anna M. Kross Center, a 47-year-old decommissioned jail separate from the detainee housing, past long corridors lined with painted handprints, "No Talking" signs and small windows facing onto basketball courts and barbed-wire fences.

On a recent Tuesday morning, Prestly Rhynie was cutting cucumbers with a blunt blade, the clang of the knife's chain reverberating with each slice.

The detainees were taking a break, eating turkey stew and boiled eggs while passing around a tub of mayonnaise. One did pull-ups from the door frame of the walk-in fridge. (The only detainees allowed to work in the Rikers kitchens are nonviolent offenders with sentences of a year or less or who are awaiting trial, and they are limited to tasks like carrying boxes and cleaning counters. They make \$1.45 an hour.)

The stew had already been portioned into hotel pans and placed in wagons that would soon head to the various jail buildings, where most detainees are served in recreation rooms. Those who have committed violent crimes while incarcerated get their meals on sealed trays in their cells.



Many foods on the current menus are packaged and frozen — and unpopular with detainees, according to the cooks.

Knives must be chained to the kitchen counter before a cook can use them.



Diamond Wynn, left, and her team at Hot Bread Kitchen led trainings for the new menus. The city correction commissioner, Lynelle Maginley-Liddie, right, also attended.

The cooks have been trained to make dishes like butternut squash macaroni and cheese and vegan sancocho, a beloved Puerto Rican stew, by Hot Bread Kitchen, the nonprofit managing the new program. The initial goals are modest: The new plant-based dishes will be incorporated into two meals a week, with the goal of increasing to four meals in nine to 12 months.

In the dish room, on another day, a group of detainees washed and wiped down pans. One of them, Jonathan Harvey, had been at Rikers just shy of eight months and was set to be released the following week, in time to spend Thanksgiving with his family, he said.

He worked in the kitchen so he could buy snacks from the commissary. “Sometimes,” he said, “I just don’t want to eat this jail food.”

Diamond Wynn, a lead culinary instructor at Hot Bread Kitchen, wants to change that mind-set. In the break room, she taught the cooks about the differences between roasting and baking, and offered a tray of macaroni and cheese for them to sample.

“If you wouldn’t eat it yourself, don’t serve it,” she told them.

Ms. Wynn and her team have experienced the limitations of the Rikers kitchen firsthand as they develop recipes. No fine chopping; the knives are dull and time is short. No sauces that require blending; there’s no industrial-size blender. And no salt.



Jonathan Harvey, left, a detainee who was set to be released shortly, said he worked in the kitchen so he could buy snacks from the commissary.



Detainees who have committed violence while in jail receive their meals on sealed trays rather than in a communal setting.



Mr. Reina is part of the kitchen staff that makes meals and loads them into wagons to be taken to the various jail buildings.

“I genuinely don’t think that any of the meals they produce are bad or not tasty,” she said. “They just lack salt.”

Ms. Wynn’s workaround is using spice mixes that contain salt, like jerk or taco seasoning, which are somehow allowed in the kitchen — a paradox she finds frustrating.

“It shows the blind spots in nutritional analysis,” she said.

She has the cooks practice each recipe with and without certain ingredients so they can adapt if shortages arise. Her team recently conducted tastings with detainees, who she said enjoyed dishes like Rasta Pasta and Cajun rice that were spiced generously and reminded some of home.

But she has reservations about the program. “A government mandate for meals to be plant-based is already intimidating and tricky for folks who otherwise prefer animal protein in their diets,” she said. “Some even gave the feedback that a meal without meat triggers memories of poverty.”

Life Beyond the Island

Mr. Reina, an immigrant from Panama with six grown children, has cooked at Rikers long enough to remember when the jail served dishes like fried chicken, pizza and roasted pork chops — before it shifted toward healthier dishes in 2010 (likely a response to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s 2008 executive order that city agencies follow certain nutritional standards for the food they serve).

Mr. Reina will occasionally veer from a recipe and perk up a dish with a little soy sauce or black pepper.

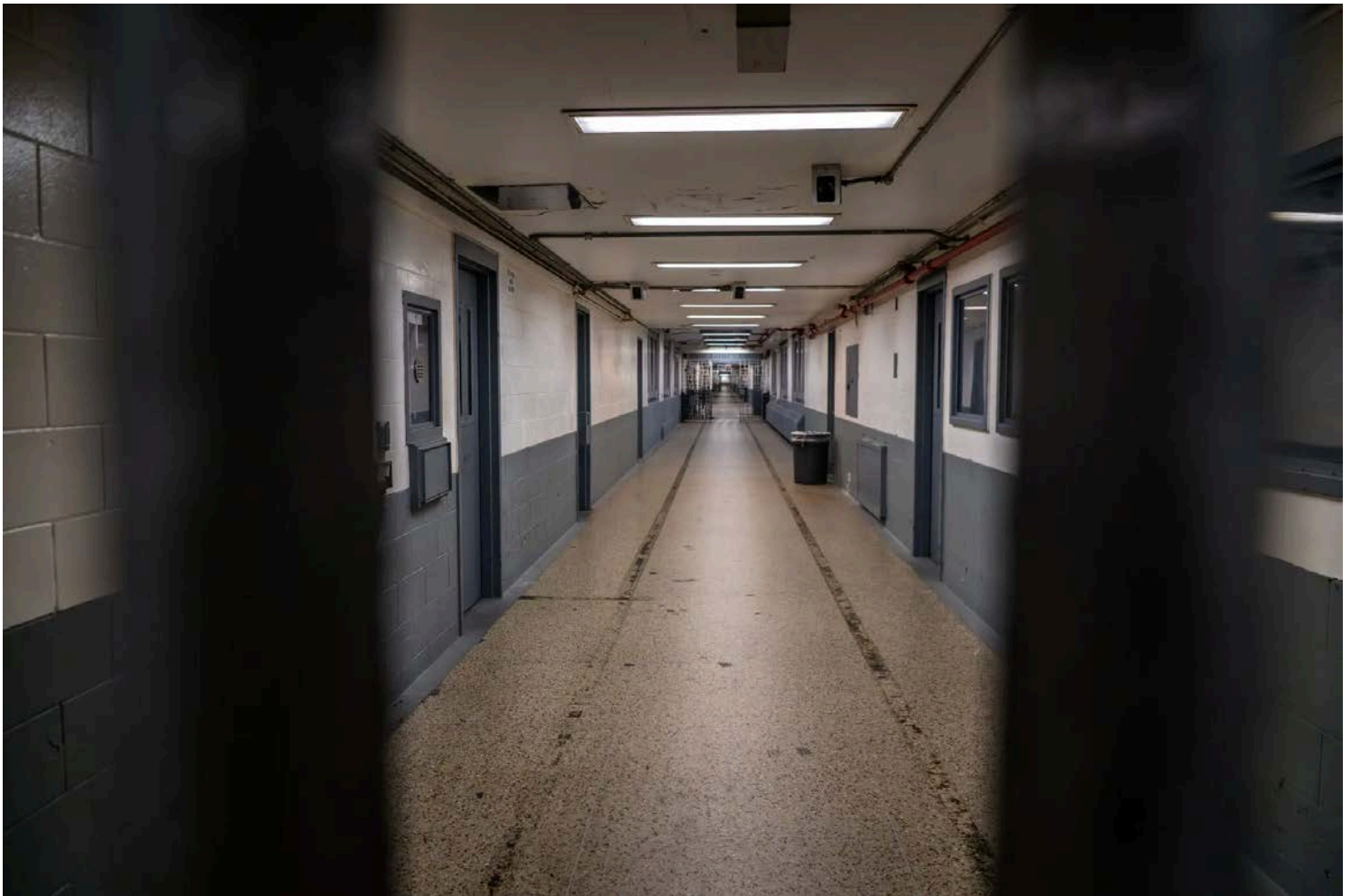
No matter what he cooks, detainees complain. “In my 29 years, you can’t please them,” he said. “This isn’t Applebee’s, but we do the best with what we have.”

He has his own complaints. His salary has risen only \$15,000, to \$49,000 a year, in nearly three decades of work. He’s been cursed at by those who dislike the food. And he is unsettled by some of the stories he hears about Rikers.

“There is a lot of inhumane stuff: violence and cutting and drugs,” he said. “Trust me, it does happen.” But he said he has stayed because he loves his co-workers.

In a year and a half, Mr. Reina plans to retire. “Half my life I have been coming to this island,” he said. Spending this much time inside has given him an itch to travel — to go on a cruise, visit his family in Panama and eat pasta in Italy.

“You want to get out and explore,” he said.



Many cooks said they felt as if they were incarcerated while working behind locked gates in the Rikers kitchens.

Produced by Gabriel H. Sanchez and Umi Syam.

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