



WATCH & LEARN: HOW WE LIVE ECONOMICS OF FOOD: PRISON FOOD SYSTEMS THE VALUE OF RAMEN IN PRISON(4:32 mn) VIDEO Script & Vocabulary (page 1 of 2/v22147)

INTERMEDIATE (B1 - B2) AND ABOVE

- ◊ Read the script and note new vocabulary
- ◊ Write three sentences using new vocabulary
- ◊ Prepare for the discussion questions

Starting
Off

Instant ramen noodles have become like cash among inmates in the US and one former inmate has even written a definitive book on the subject: Prison Ramen.

- 1 Read the **Video Script** below. The words in **bold** are defined in the **Vocabulary** section. Look up any new words in a dictionary.
- 2 Go to the **Your Turn** section at the end of this document. Practice using new words and expressions from the video script to prepare for your next class.
- 3 Look at the **Discussion Questions** and prepare your responses for the next class.

Discussion Questions:

- ◊ Do you like instant ramen noodles?
- ◊ Do you think the quality of the food served at public institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons in your country is of sufficient quality?
- ◊ Why do you suppose ramen noodles have become such a valued commodity in US prisons that can be exchanged for just about anything an inmate desires?

Video Script:

About Gustavo "Goose" Alvarez:

Gustavo Alvarez was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco - Mexico. Raised in West Los Angeles, part of his life was spent incarcerated. From



the ages of 16-39 Gustavo was in and out of juvenile and adult correctional facilities for various crimes. While serving time in Tehachapi State Prison he turned his life around and became a part of a mentorship program for at risk kids called S.E.E.K aimed at educating children. Gustavo then successfully completed the 12-step *Celebrate Recovery Program* that changed his life. In May of 2013, Gustavo was released from federal prison and in November of 2015 he saw the publication of *Prison Ramen* which he co-authored with Hollywood actor and childhood friend Clifton Collins Jr. Gustavo lives as a free man in Mexico today.

Narrator: Instant ramen: it's warm, flavorful, quick, cheap and **filling**. It's the chosen favorite among college kids and **inmates** across America. Check usage reports from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections for example, and you'll see that ramen was the number one sold item at prison **commissaries**. Ramen has become like cash among American prisoners because **behind bars**, it can buy you anything.

Gustavo "Goose" Alvarez: Anything, anything that's got any value. From clothes, drugs, uh, a favor. Hey, I like the way your **penmanship** is, can you write this letter for me, can you draw this for me, you know, *anything*. It's... it's **literally** gold.

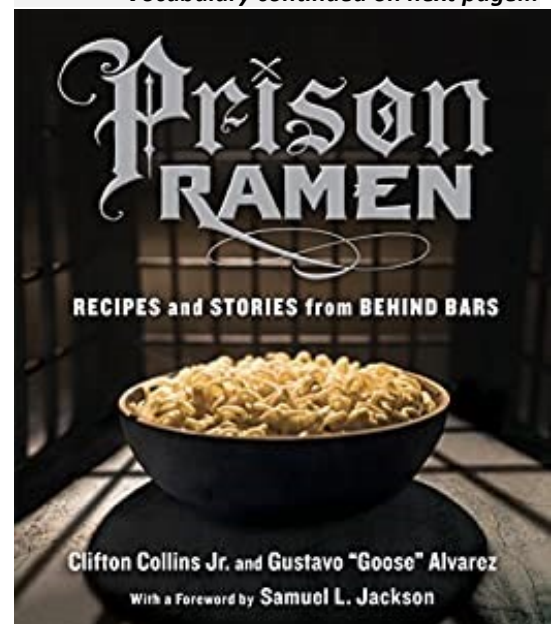
Narrator: This is Gustavo "Goose" Alvarez. After 13 years in and out of prison, he ***literally** wrote **the book on prison ramen**.

Alvarez: Ramen is the best and easiest currency because everybody uses it. That's everybody's **staple** to cook. You gotta have ramen.

Vocabulary:

- **filling** - (of food) leaving one with a pleasantly satiated feeling
- **inmate** - a person confined to an institution such as a prison or hospital
- **commissary** - a restaurant or food store in a military base, prison, or other institution
- **behind bars** - in prison
- **penmanship** - the art or skill of writing by hand; a person's handwriting
- **literally** - (informal) used for emphasis while not being literally true
- ***literally** - in a literal manner or sense; exactly
- **the book on prison ramen** - A unique and edgy cookbook, *Prison Ramen* takes readers behind bars with more than 65 ramen recipes and stories of prison life from the inmate/cooks who devised them
- **staple** - a main or important element of something

Vocabulary continued on next page...



Video Script continued on next page...



WATCH & LEARN: HOW WE LIVE
ECONOMICS OF FOOD: PRISON FOOD SYSTEMS
THE VALUE OF RAMEN IN PRISON(4:32 mn)
VIDEO Script & Vocabulary (page 2 of 2/v22147)

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Video Script continued...

Narrator: Because prisoners can't possess cash, they use objects to trade for other goods and services and anything that replaces cash has to be **durable**, portable, divisible into standardized units and highly valued. Ramen **fits the bill**, because unlike other traded objects like stamps, which are expensive, and tobacco, which is **banned** in most prisons, ramen is **cheap** and easy to **get a hold of**. In the commissary, a single pack of ramen **runs** about \$.59 on average. But, once it's out of the official commissary, ramen's value is determined by an informal prison economy.

Alvarez: They **barter** with it, they become jailhouse stores **so to speak**, like guys would purchase all the ramen, kind of like that scene in *Orange Is The New Black*. She took over the market.

Inmate character on Orange is the New Black: Jesus, who bought all the ramens?

Alvarez: Guys **fill up** their shelves with this and they have their own store and they put their price on it. Your ramen could sell for two to three dollars **believe it or not**.

Narrator: A 2016 study found that while a sweatshirt cost \$10.81 at the commissary at Sunbelt State Penitentiary, an inmate could sell that sweatshirt for 2 packs of ramen, increasing the value of ramen by 916 percent. In fact, food items are the **overwhelming** majority of what people buy. An analysis of annual commissary sales in three states shows that 75% of spending was entirely on food and beverages. Inmates aren't just using ramen as cash; they are also eating it. Creative cooking in prison is a necessity. When asked if prison meals were enough to live off of, Alvarez said:

Alvarez: No. I think you would starve, literally. I lost like ten pounds you know because they give you a meal that's maybe for a five-year-old, a 10-year-old. But it wasn't **up to par**. It wasn't your four food groups, it was none of that.

Narrator: So ramen can **supplement** when the food provided isn't enough. With 2.3 million people in US prisons, and pressure to cut costs, food is one area where federal and state governments are trying to save money. Some inmates are now being fed for as little as \$1.77 a meal. In one instance, the **Marshall Project** reported that one prison had **whittled down** costs to as low as \$.56 a meal. But keeping food costs low doesn't come without consequences. Aramark, a private food vendor to over 600 correctional facilities, has been cited for giving inmates **tainted** food and serving fewer and smaller meals.

TV Journalist: New information tonight about ongoing problems with **maggots** found in Ohio prison kitchens.

Narrator: Issues like this with Aramark and other private food vendors have prompted **civil lawsuits** and protests in response to the state of food. Turns out food isn't just about nutrition; it's also about security. Despite everything, ramen has become a way inmates keep a sense of control while in **the system**.

Alvarez: We would actually make a **humongous spread** and these soups would be the equalizer for all of us to sit down and have a meal, you know, and not stress on what's happening in the prison yard.

Narrator: Trade and bartering in prison isn't new, but until there are systemic changes in its food system, ramen will likely stay at the top of the prison trade economy. Simply because food is a basic need and ramen is a basic solution.

Vocabulary continued...

- **durable** - able to withstand wear
- **fits the bill** - be suitable for particular a purpose
- **ban** - officially or legally prohibit
- **cheap** - inexpensive
- **get a hold of** - obtain
- **runs** - costs
- **barter** - exchange (goods or services) for other goods or services without using money
- **so to speak** - used to highlight the fact that one is describing something in an unusual or metaphorical way
- **fill up** - cause a space or container to become full
- **believe it or not** - used to concede that a statement is surprising
- **overwhelming** - very great in amount
- **up to par** - at expected or usual quality
- **supplement** - a thing added to something else in order to complete or enhance it
- **Marshall Project** - nonprofit, online journalism organization focusing on issues related to criminal justice in the United States
- **whittle down** - to gradually make (something) smaller by removing parts
- **taint** - contaminate or pollute (something)
- **maggot** - a soft-bodied legless larva of a fly or other insect found in decaying matter
- **civil lawsuit** - In general terms, a *civil lawsuit* is the court-based process through which Person A can seek to hold Person B liable for some type of harm or wrongful act.
- **the system** - the prison system
- **humongous spread** - large quantity and variety of food to be shared by a group

Your Turn! Using new vocabulary is the best way to learn and remember it.

1 Choose three words or expressions from the video that are new to you and write a sentence using each one in your notebook.