

## What's for lunch?

At first, it looks like a regular restaurant kitchen: huge bins of dry ingredients, long stainless-steel counters, a cooler full of fruits and vegetables and a pantry stocked with honey, ketchup, canned pumpkin, applesauce and more.

But look more closely. The dry bins don't contain flour or sugar, they contain "tropical bits" and "bird of paradise pellet." In the freezer, large rolls of sausage are labeled "carnivore." And nearby, under tight plastic lids, are neat stacks of frozen mice. In the background is the unmistakable sound of crickets chirping.

This is the commissary at the National Zoo, where every meal for the zoo's 2,000 animals is prepared by a specially trained staff of 10.

"We try to have this function as much like a restaurant kitchen as possible," said Mike Maslanka, one of the two nutritionists who run the kitchen.

"I don't like the crickets so much," he said. "You end up with escapees."

### A huge task

The zoo commissary is about the size of a basketball court and surrounded by large food storage areas. Built under Parking Lot C, the kitchen is out of view but manages a huge operation. Each year, the commissary uses up massive quantities of food, including seven tons of leafy greens such as lettuce, kale, cabbage and spinach, four tons of bananas, three tons of capelin (a small fish) and 100 tons of hay.

Cooking for the zoo's residents ranges from the most basic to the very complex. In the reptile house, for example, many snakes simply get one whole mouse - delivered daily by the commissary to the reptile keepers. But cooking for the birds is not so easy. Their diets often follow complex recipes that contain "minuscule amounts of a lot

of things" that have to be carefully measured and mixed, Maslanka said.

### Details, details

It's not always possible to feed the animals what they would eat in the wild. The lions, for example, can't be fed zebra meat, so they get beef - nearly 500 pounds a week!

Zoo nutritionists analyze each animal's diet from its native habitat, including the vitamin and mineral content. Then they try to come up with a replacement that has all the same properties. The beef that is fed to the lions, for example, needs calcium added to it because in the wild, lions eat the bones of their prey, which contain a lot of calcium. The commissary provides large bones for the big cats to chew on, but those are mainly to help keep their teeth clean.

Some animals, coming from the wild or other zoos, have to be trained to eat foods other than what they're used

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to, and it can take a while for the commissary to come up with a nutritious diet that the animal likes, or recognizes as food.

Other commissary customers are just plain picky eaters, such as birds or snakes that “show a preference for white mice versus brown mice,” Maslanka said.

### **Play with your food**

The role food plays in an animal’s life is important, too. If, in the wild, an animal normally spends all day hunting or foraging for food, then it needs to do the same at the zoo. “We could feed every animal in the zoo just dry pellets and biscuits,” Maslanka said, but most animals would get bored. Imagine if your mother tried to feed you the same bowl of cereal for every meal, every day!

To keep the animals engaged, keepers often scatter the commissary food so animals can search for it. Meercats get their meal worms and insects hidden inside objects they have to break into. The gorillas, meanwhile, get a different mix of fruits and veggies - such as oranges, melons, cucumbers and lettuce - tossed all over the floor of their

enclosure each day. The gorillas like roaming around to see what’s on the menu.

And just like you do, the animals get special treats - often frozen into solid blocks, hidden inside toys or hung in hard-to-reach places. These so-called “enrichment foods” give the animals a fun activity and a special reward.

So what makes a tasty treat for a zoo animal? It’s not always sweet, because not all animals can sense sweetness, Maslanka said. Rather, these special snacks are often made of foods nearly every kid has eaten, such as ketchup and mustard for the elephants, baby food for geckos, applesauce for primates, peanut butter for anteaters and, just like Winnie the Pooh, honey for bears.

— Margaret Webb Pressler