

Five Deliciously Daring Food Heists

For chefs, food is a priceless material that allows them to express their creativity and passion. But for some criminals, food is merely another commodity that can be bought and sold—or in the case of these five notorious food heists, stolen and sold.

“Pappygate” Becomes Intoxicating Kentucky Folklore





In 2015, an odd Kentucky criminal syndicate that traded in expensive liquor was revealed to have operated through a common, yet unlikely place: a local softball team. When the crime occurred in 2013, Sheriff Pat Melton had a hunch that the theft of about \$100,000 worth of extremely rare bourbon from the Buffalo Trace Distillery was most likely an inside job — he just needed to prove it. Two years later, an anonymous tip proved him right, and the crime that had been known as “Pappygate” was solved.

Ringleader Gilbert “Toby” Curtsinger, who was an employee at Buffalo Trace Distillery’s loading docks, was arrested when a variety of stolen bourbon — including 25 bottles of Pappy Van Winkle, five barrels of Wild Turkey, and one barrel of Eagle Rare — was found in his home. Despite Curtsinger’s attempt to disguise the product logos by painting the barrels black, he had been caught red-handed.

Curtsinger — along with his co-conspirators who helped him distribute the stolen bourbon through contacts they met at softball tournaments — was charged with illegal trafficking of bourbon, engaging in organized crime, and theft and receipt of bourbon. In 2017, he plead guilty to unlawful taking and receiving of stolen property and was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2018. However, he only served 30 days after the judge allowed him to be released under shock probation, meaning he could be sent to prison for a short time before being set free.

Prepared to Steal



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When 63 cases of cookies went missing from the Girl Scouts Wilderness Road Chapter in Kentucky, it didn't raise eyebrows at first because troops, and even individual members, often sell large volumes of cookies. However, when the money and troop leader, Leah Ann Vick, never turned up, it became clear that she had absconded with the cookies, worth over \$15,000. Months later, she was arrested for felony theft by unlawful taking and the cookies were found safely stashed in a cupboard, waiting to be sold.

Although Vick would have advised the girls in her troop to be prepared, she gave police a vague explanation about her crime stemming from poor money management on her part. The Girl Scouts did not reclaim the stolen [cookies](#), but according to Haleigh McGraw of the Girl Scouts of Kentucky, the effects of Vick's crime are bigger than that.

"Our biggest and foremost concern is our girls. The cookie sale is more than selling cookies for our troops," McGraw said [in an interview](#) with People magazine. "Selling cookies is the top girl-led business in the country. So our main purpose of the cookie sale is financial literacy for the girls. Number one on our skills is money management and business ethics."

Since Vick had not learned these skills herself, she plead guilty to her crime and was sentenced to two years in prison in 2017.

A Cheesy Affair



When you're hauling 42,000 pounds of stolen Muenster [cheese](#) in an 18-wheeler, you may not want to make a pit stop at a service area named after the coach of a football team whose fans are affectionately known as "cheeseheads." Veniamin Balika found this out the hard way when he was arrested at the Vince Lombardi Service Area on the New Jersey State Turnpike in 2013 for fencing and receiving stolen property after making off with 1,135 cases of cheese worth \$200,000.

Balika's plan began cleverly enough when he presented bogus paperwork to Pasture Pride Cheese in Wisconsin so the distributor would release the Muenster to him and he could go on his merry way to his planned deals in Pennsylvania. However, bad cheesehead karma kicked in for Balika: His sales fell through, he was reported to police by an anonymous informant, and he was caught loitering at the rest stop trying to haphazardly unload the cheesy cargo.

Balika plead no contest to the charges in 2014 and received a 270-day jail sentence. He was also ordered to pay \$97,000 in restitution. Since K & K Cheese, where the stolen cheese was manufactured, could not guarantee the integrity of the Muenster, they chose not to claim the recovered product. The New Jersey Department of Health planned to inspect the cheese for safety and, if given the green light for consumption, donate it to charity.

Thieves Fly the Coop With Chicken Wings



Photo by Brian Chan on Unsplash

The two men would make orders with Twin Trees Too's wholesaler using the company's account and then pick up the wings to resell from the back of a truck or in a warehouse. In order to cover their tracks, they destroyed all of the paperwork from the orders they made. But the long wing of the law eventually caught up with them and the Rojeks were charged with falsifying business records and grand larceny.

The son, Joshua Rojek, plead guilty in 2016 and was sentenced to 60 days in jail, to be served on weekends, and five years of probation. Paul Rojek, who was the brains behind the operation, was given one to three years in prison. This was not the elder Rojek's first

foray into food heisting: He had previously been charged with stealing thousands of dollars of food from Dominick's Restaurant and concocted the chicken wing scam during the time he'd agreed to stay out of trouble.

New Policy Leads to Avocado Pilfering



Photo by twinsfisch on Unsplash

When Mission Produce in California updated its policy to delivering [avocados](#) to its customers rather than having them pick the boxes up, the customers were not the only ones able to benefit from the change. Since some customers weren't notified about the new policy, three of the company's employees decided it was the perfect opportunity to sell boxes of avocados to these unwitting patrons at a reduced price — \$20 to \$30 per box instead of the regular \$50 charge — while pocketing the money.

When customers inquired about what was going on, an internal investigation found that Mission Produce employees Joseph Valenzuela and Carlos Chavez had been selling boxes of avocados, [worth over \\$300,000](#), to people from the company's back door for several months before being detected.

The men plead guilty to felony grand theft and conspiracy, and were sentenced to two years in jail and 18 months of probation. In addition, they were ordered to pay restitution, and stay away from Mission Produce and each other.

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