

Inside story

The Clink – a charity that aims to create second chances – has set up restaurants in UK prisons to train inmates to grow, cook and serve food, **Caroline Roberts** writes

When Debbie was sent to prison for fraud, she knew she would never get another job as a nursery nurse and the future looked uncertain. But, thanks to an innovative prison training project, she was able to start a rewarding new career within a month of her release.

It was all down to The Clink, a charity that runs restaurants in prisons where inmates are trained to prepare and serve food to get them ready for a career in the hospitality industry when they leave. The restaurants are open to the public and offer a gourmet dining experience with dishes such as rabbit and pistachio terrine, beetroot and roast garlic tarte tatin and white chocolate pots with citrus bubbles. And there's definitely no porridge on the menu.

SERVING TIME

Prisoners work a 40-hour week and study for City & Guilds vocational qualifications at the same time.

'The Clink staff are really fantastic at building your confidence, and you don't feel they look on you as a prisoner,' says Debbie. 'It's great meeting lots of different people and seeing all the positive comments they've made about your service. It makes you feel you're not really that bad a person and are deserving of this. When I was in prison, working at the restaurant got me up in the morning and got me through the day.'

The first Clink restaurant opened in 2009 at High Downs Prison in Surrey, the brainchild of the then catering manager, Alberto Crisci MBE. The charity was formed a year later, and there are now Clink restaurants in four prisons across the country, two of which have their own gardens so prisoners can also



The Clink at HM Prison Brixton

work towards horticultural qualifications. It also runs two outside projects: Clink Events, which provides bespoke catering using food prepared in the prison kitchens, and a café in central Manchester. Both projects provide work experience for ex-prisoners and those on day release, as well as clients of The Clink's homeless charity partners.

The charity now has a network of more than 200 employers who are willing to take on Clink graduates, and figures from the Ministry of Justice show its success in tackling the serious problem of reoffending. Prisoners who have been through The Clink's training programme are almost 50% less likely to reoffend than other prisoners.

It has garnered more than 60 awards, including 2017 Charity of the Year at The Charity Awards. Diners are happy too,

and the restaurants consistently receive top ratings on TripAdvisor.

A key reason for its success is the integrated support system in place for prisoners once they've been released, says CEO Chris Moore. 'There's a lot of great stuff going on in prisons, but someone can have done really well inside and then they come out on a Friday night with their £40 and nowhere to go. So before release, we make sure they have a CV and a bank account, and then we meet them at the gate, get them into their accommodation and help them find employment. We're there 24/7 to help them adjust back into society.'

Eating at a Clink restaurant helps members of the public and employers understand that the prison population is a cross-section of society, and everyone needs and deserves a second chance, he

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MELANZANE OF AUBERGINE AND TOMATO (serves 4-5)

A delicious starter on the menu at The Clink



INGREDIENTS

- 2 aubergines
- salt and pepper
- plain flour to coat
- extra virgin olive oil
- 250g salad tomatoes (sliced)
- 50g Parmesan (grated)
- 150g mozzarella (grated)
- a handful of basil (shredded)
- 100g panko breadcrumbs

METHOD

1. Preheat the oven to 160°C.
2. Slice the aubergines to ½cm thick, layer on a tray and sprinkle with salt to dehydrate for 1 hour.
3. Dust the aubergine with flour and deep fry until light brown in colour. Leave to cool on a wire rack.
4. Line a deep dish (such as a loaf tin) with parchment paper.
5. Layer aubergine, tomato, Parmesan, mozzarella and basil, then drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and cover with breadcrumbs. Repeat until the dish is full.
6. Cover with more parchment paper and bake for 45-60 minutes until golden brown.
7. Once baked, press with another tin, add weight and leave to cool.

THE JUDGES' VERDICTS

Martha Sakulku from Essex had a lovely surprise when her children organised a birthday dinner for her at The Clink.

'The food was delicious and beautifully presented.

And the prisoners were very hospitable, courteous and helpful – our waiter was really funny and we laughed all evening.

'It's a fab evening out and supports a worthwhile cause that enables prisoners to move on and become useful members of society.'

Lesley Daniels from London enjoyed her experience of afternoon tea at The Clink with her daughter.



'Security was tight. We had to leave all bags and phones in a locker, and we were then escorted into the prison through two security gates. We were searched before going into the restaurant.

The afternoon tea was lovely, especially the cakes. We sent our thanks to the pastry chef and he came out to speak to us.

'The restaurant is posh, and if it wasn't for such things as the absence of alcohol, you wouldn't know you were in a prison. Everyone was so polite and professional, and it's good to know the training is so productive that some inmates leave with jobs already lined up.'

adds. 'When I visit one of our projects and talk to a prisoner for the first time, their past is their identity. But within a few weeks, they start to walk tall, look you in the eye and tell you about their hopes for the future. When you walk into a restaurant or hotel on the outside and come across somebody you've seen on that journey, it's very rewarding.'

Debbie is a case in point. She is now working as a food and beverage supervisor with the Kew Green hotel chain. 'The positive feedback scores from guests have gone from 60% to 85%, and I was nominated for Best Newcomer in the Kew Green awards,' she says proudly.

'One day, there was only me in the restaurant with the new staff, and it just

felt really good to be trusted with that. It has given me a massive confidence boost. Obviously, I wish I hadn't been in prison, but it has opened up new opportunities for me. Without The Clink, it could have been a different story.'

To find out more, visit www.thelinkcharity.org