

Time served

Portland restaurant groups consider new hires from Oregon's prison system



WIKICOMMONS

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When Cala began serving its now-acclaimed Mexican cuisine in San Francisco two years ago, most diners didn't know that more than half the restaurant's 50 employees had previously served time in prison.

"The truth is, it's just smart business," Cala's General Manager Emma Rosenbush recently told a private audience at Portland's Laurelhurst Theater.

Cala was in a pinch because the cost of living in the Bay Area had become too expensive for many service industry workers, she explained — but jobseekers coming out of prison were readily available.

It's a scenario that's becoming a reality in Portland too, as rents continue to outpace wages.

Rosenbush had been invited to speak to Portland-area restaurant industry managers and owners at a screening of "The Return" this past September.

They had come to see the documentary about difficulties inmates face when they're released from prison — and to learn more about how to hire them.

The screening sparked plans for a restaurant industry night and job fair inside Columbia River Correctional Institution, a minimum-security state prison located in Northeast Portland.

Leading the effort locally is Andy Ricker's Pok Pok Restaurants, which co-sponsored the movie screening and has already had success with two former inmates it hired at its Brooklyn, N.Y., location.

"They were both successful, exemplary employees," said Lindsay Druhot, Ricker's

executive assistant and relations manager. "They were always on time; no problems."

Pok Pok is partnering with local nonprofit A Social Ignition to host the job fair, and organizers are looking for other interested restaurant groups to join them.

They're encouraging restaurateurs in Portland's food scene with two or more establishments to attend the event, which is still in the planning stages and slated for January.

"What we are not looking for is McDonalds, because the guys can walk in there and get a job pretty easily," said Sonja Skvarla, founder of A Social Ignition. "We're looking for more established, very 'Portland' restaurants."

She expects inmates who are within 6 months of release will make up the bulk of attendees at the job fair. Restaurant owners and managers who participate will be expected to present their business and be prepared to talk to inmates about how to get a job and be successful in the industry.

Men and women reentering society after incarceration face many challenges, but if employers partner with a nonprofit that helps former inmates through the process, it can make all the difference, explained Rosenbush. The nonprofit reentry partner can help an employer navigate the challenges of working with formerly incarcerated workers, and help them find the right fit for their business.

Cala had to make a few changes to make its environment more suitable for its staff, such as eliminating the free alcoholic beverage employees typically enjoy at the end of each shift at most restaurants. Because many people coming out of prison are in recovery, it made sense for Cala to prohibit employee drinking on site.

But the reward of being able to provide people with a second chance has outweighed any sacrifice, Rosenbush said.

The film's co-writer and co-director, Kelly Duane de la Vega, told attendees that when she showed the film inside America's prisons, what she heard repeatedly was that inmates needed help finding jobs after their release.

This inspired her to take one of the film's main characters, Bilal Chatman, to movie screenings

for business owners and managers across the country, with stops in New York City, Los Angeles, Seattle and Philadelphia.

After the screening in Portland, former-inmate Chatman told Street Roots that when the film's team visited inmates in Oregon's prisons, they echoed what inmates all over the country were saying:

"They wanted more programs, they want more job opportunities when they get out, and they are concerned about rehabilitation and reentry," he said.

Oregon Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) also spoke at the screening. He said that while Oregon took positive steps forward this past legislative session when it passed a number of bills aimed at helping former inmates reenter society, reentry still remains a "huge

"As a society, we are not helping anybody gain the hands-on skills that they need to be in a new career. There is a gap between what we expect from inmates reentering society and what we prepare them for."

— SONJA SKVARLA
DIRECTOR, SOCIAL IGNITION

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