

Fine dining in a prison: Case study of The Clink restaurants, U.K.

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Within the western developed world, statistics showing high incarceration, increasing crime rates and high rates of prisoner reoffending are a cause for concern. To tackle these issues that relate globally to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), notably Goals 4, 8 and 16, a number of initiatives have been pioneered within prisons. Among such initiatives has emerged a trend toward a form of responsible, socially conscious hospitality.

While former prisons turned into museums have become popular tourist experiences worldwide (Strange and Kempa, 2003), working prisons are not usually considered places tourists choose to visit. That said, fine dining in working prisons has grown in popularity. Visitors can now receive culinary experiences by dining at restaurants within minimum- or medium- security prisons staffed by inmates who are close to release; notable examples include The Clink restaurants in the U.K., the Gate to Plate festival event in New Zealand, the InGalera restaurant in Italy, and the INTERNO in Columbia. In this short case study, we consider the emerging niche tourism experience of dining in prisons through the case of the four successful Clink training restaurants in the U.K. to show how fine dining in these restaurants may see tourist dollars go towards making a positive social change.

In partnership with Her Majesty's Prison Service, The Clink Charity in the U.K. operates four public restaurants within working prisons in Brixton, Cardiff, High Down, and Styal (see Table 1), as well as The Clink Café in Manchester, Clink Events and Clink@Home. Through the operation of the four training restaurants, the charity aims to change attitudes, transform lives and create second chances by focusing on prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration (The Clink Charity, 2020). The food is prepared and served by prisoners in training. The Clink recruits' prisoners with six to 18 months left on their sentence and who have completed all other restorative courses. The prisoners volunteer to be trained and are then screened by the prison service to ensure that they fulfil the prison's security criteria and are also safe to work with the public. The charity delivers training and work experience to prisoners via a

five-step integrated model. The steps are recruitment, training, support (whilst in prison), and employment and mentoring (post-release). The students, as The Clink prefers to call prisoners, also gain formal qualifications in catering, as all four restaurants are registered catering colleges.

As they are dining in a working prison, public visitors to the Clink restaurants must undertake initial security clearance, phones and cameras must be left outside, and there is a no alcohol policy. The attraction of paying to dine at a Clink restaurant is the memorable experience it provides, enjoyment of high-end meals comparable to any conventional fine dining establishment, and the professional and welcoming customer service. Moreover, dining in one of the Clink restaurants is proving a means to change the deep-set negative social assumptions about prisoners. Analysis of 3,951 TripAdvisor online customer reviews shows that diners report great meals and service, and come to view their prisoner wait staff more as trainee hospitality employees delivering the same professional service expected at other fine dining establishments (McIntosh, Gebbels and Harkison, 2020). The Clink Charity's ethos too was inspiring for customers who recognise the key drivers of prisoner rehabilitation and second chances, and hence, comment that they are happy to support the worthwhile cause.

Due to COVID-19, the charity had to adapt its business model by providing a take-away service, Clink@Home, based at the Brixton restaurant. To use this service, customers place their orders online, meals are prepared by trainee chefs using fresh, local produce, and then home delivered by ex-prisoners.

Only a few academic studies have considered the potential of specific hospitality training or prison restaurant operations for rehabilitating offenders (Beier, 2015; Harkison and McIntosh, 2019). That said, statistics released by The Clink Charity provide evidence that inmates who have participated in their training programme had a significantly lower rate of recidivism.

Less remains known however about demand-related perspectives, such as customer motives and satisfaction of dining at the prison restaurants, or how customer interactions with prisoner staff may potentially dismantle the existing stigma of an offender. There also remains much to be known about how this niche form of gastronomy tourism may offer opportunities to differentiate tourist experiences within destinations, especially as niche products are seen to offer a more meaningful and sustainable type of tourism (Novelli, 2005). That said, there is increased public media reporting of gourmet restaurants inside prisons (Thomas-Graham, 2019). In this way, anecdotal evidence increasingly suggests that the emerging trend for fine dining inside prisons is a niche compelling idea that seems to be spreading and is worthy of further investigation.

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