

The Clink Serves Not Only the Prison Food

From the 12th century until 1780, The Clink was Britain's most notorious prison, detaining heretics and priests, debtors and rebel rousers. With the clink of a lock, inmates were condemned to a diet of bread and water. Things change. On May 11th 2009, The Clink re-opened at Her Majesty's Prison High Down, Sutton, Surrey. This time, however, it is a restaurant serving gourmet and wholesome food to prison staff, visitors and the public.



The Experience

The Clink offers a memorable dining experience. Patrons enter via the prison gates, following a security check, and cross a yard to a barred door. There, patrons enter a sixty by seventy feet dining room, illuminated by computer controlled lighting. From the reception area's ten foot etched glass panel, customers will be led by a prisoner-turned-waiter, to prisoner-designed and built tables and elegant seating, set beneath an exhibition of British prisoner artworks.

The restaurant seats eighty customers at eight tables, served by ten inmates. Working with The Clink's designer, Derek Taylor, the furniture in The Clink has been designed and constructed by prisoners, hand crafted and signed by the inmate carpenter who produced the piece. An elevated area behind etched glass provides a smaller group of customers with privacy, while offering a clear view of the open plan food preparation area.

With nine more prisoners at work in the kitchen (under the guidance of Chef Crisci and his ex-prisoner chef trainee), the open plan feature includes a Moltenia bespoke stove and a state of the art food preparation area.

Locally sourced food, including vegetables grown in the prison garden, is principally wholesome and healthy British fare, with two sittings at breakfast (0630 – 0930) and lunch (1200 – 1400), primarily for staff and visitors. Invited groups and specialist events generate exquisite gourmet menus, using the finest locally sourced ingredients.



The Project

The Clink is the idea of the Catering Services Manager at H.M. Prison High Down, Chef Alberto Crisci. A fully operational restaurant is now open INSIDE the walls of the gaol, operated entirely by prisoners, serving up to 1000 meals a day to staff, visitors and commercial customers.

The restaurant is self sustaining and non-profit making, and is operated by Eco-Actif Services CIC. With the commitment of the prison's Governor, Peter Dawson, the restaurant is now open and in full operation, as part of a multi-million pound investment in the improvement of prison facilities. With no additional tax payer investment, nor extra staff costs, the restaurant is a considered and practical move toward a solution to problems faced by lives interrupted.

There are easy jokes about doing porridge, or thyme served, but a prison sentence is no joke. Hard time is hard fact. When a prisoner is released, he faces what seem insurmountable problems, including health, housing, family and employment. The Clink represents a genuine opportunity for change. It offers every inductee the chance to gain catering qualifications, experience within an exciting and operational business, and guidance to a full time job upon release.



In turn, this provides ex-offenders with self respect, secure housing and a stable family life. A decent life in a decent society. One High Down inmate spent the last year of his sentence on secondment at an external restaurant. With Chef Crisci's work with Surrey Job Match, three ex-offenders left HMP High Down to high skill catering positions. The Clink will garner a national reputation for excellence that will increase pathways to employment for hundreds of men, or even more.

While security at HMP High Down remains the primary concern, new systems have been introduced to ensure the appropriate screening of prisoners, staff and patrons. The Clink project and its associated educational courses will benefit hundreds of prisoners over the coming years.

The Clink, Her Majesty's Prison High Down, High Down Lane, Sutton, Surrey, England, SM2 5PJ, UK

Photos: The Clink

<http://www.theclinkonline.com>

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