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Serving Time

At a San Francisco restaurant like no other, fine food is prepared and presented strictly by felons.

By J.R. Moehringer

Just another day at Delancey Street. A bank robber is broiling the chickens. A jewel thief is refilling the water glasses. A waiter is talking about his time in San Quentin.

Which waiter? Take your pick. They've all come straight from lockup, same as the chefs, bartenders, busboys. That clean-cut kid serving the rib-eye? Assault and battery. That Delancey Street might look like every other successful restaurant in this restaurant-obsessed city, but the menu here comes second to the mission: providing felons with a solid first step on the straight-and-narrow.

Mimi Silbert, who started Delancey Street 35 years ago, explains the restaurant with a metaphor—followed by another metaphor, and another. (Silbert has more metaphors than Delancey Street has forks.) It's one big supportive family, she says, countless loud uncles and cousins jammed under one roof, just like the family in which she grew up, back in Mattapan, Mass.

No, it's Ellis Island, she says, and the cons are aliens from a faraway land, called "The American Underclass," who need time—two years at least, but usually four—to prepare for their "immigration" into American society.

No, no, above all, Delancey Street is Amnesty, Silbert's black-eyed mutt, currently snuffling a customer's leg. Years ago Silbert and some Delancey Street cons stole Amnesty from a nearby pound. (Long story, she says laughing.) She loves that dog like a daughter, and sank into a depression recently when the vet gave Amnesty hours to live. But Amnesty proved the vet wrong. Bald, riddled with sores, Amnesty won't give up, and Silbert and the cons won't give up on Amnesty, and that same ethos of tenacity, loyalty and amnesty for everyone cast aside by so-called experts is Delancey Street.

And yet Amnesty is also the reason that Silbert—a petite 64-year-old woman with a distinct New England accent—is gathering her chefs today, this minute, during this lull between lunch and dinner: Preoccupied with Amnesty's health, Silbert has been slack about monitoring the food. As a result, she says, the latkes are "sucky," the marinara is acidic, and don't even freaking mention the onion marmalade.

Silbert, who holds advanced degrees in psychology and criminology, and once studied with Jean-Paul Sartre, can out-curse any con, which comes in handy, because Delancey Street is no Sesame Street.

Twelve hulking chefs, each the size of two full Silberts, gather around her in the spotless kitchen. Her little plum suit, against their massive kitchen whites, looks like a bloodstain on an iceberg. Though their missing teeth and skull tattoos bespeak a history of dealing poorly with criticism, they endure Silbert's scolding with good humor and respect—Delancey Street trademarks.

In fact, it's this attitude that probably keeps people coming back. The food can be exceptional. But the true specialty of the house is hard-boiled politeness, with a side of sincerity, over easy. Every con who comes to Delancey Street, Silbert explains, is ordered to "act nice," until the act becomes real. A trained therapist, Silbert believes minor surface adjustments can generate major inner reform.

The always-be-nice mandate, however, doesn't always apply to Silbert. If she finds fault with a dish—particularly if it's one of her own cherished family recipes—nice takes a holiday. "I'm going to be a little brutal," she warns the assembled staff. "Who's been cooking the potato latkes? I need whoever did it to say you're the one who did it!"

Once upon a time, such a question would have drawn stony silence from the cons, who've spent their lives obeying one primal creed: Never confess. But at Delancey Street, confession is a constant. Confession is a prelude to atonement, forgiveness and personal growth. Doesn't matter if you make a mistake, Silbert tells the cons. What matters is how you deal. "That's the difference between healthy and self-destructive people," she says.

The latke culprit steps forward. Silbert reminds him that latkes must be cooked slowly, to bring out the sweetness of the onion. He nods, hangdog. She asks him to go to the stove and make her a latke, the right way, then moves onto the next item.

After every criticism has been delivered, and digested, Silbert asks the chefs how they're dealing with stress, and it's clear again that this is no ordinary restaurant. She asks them: Are you remembering to laugh? Got to laugh, she urges them, speaking in the baby talk she uses with Amnesty. Laughter is key, she says. Laughter is central to what we're doing at Delancey Street.

Cons tend to take themselves seriously, which precludes change, Silbert says. Given the "enormous pain in their lives," pain suffered and caused, Silbert insists that the cons laugh a lot—at their flaws, their pasts, their uncertain futures—as a way to become calm and happy and open to possibilities.

The men look down at her, smiling, laughing. Then one lumbers away to take Amnesty for a walk.

Finally, before sending everyone back to work, Silbert sings the praises of 56-year-old Winfred Cooper, who has been a maestro lately on that rotisserie. Cooper adjusts his

glasses and looks as if he's about to cry. Moments later, he does cry, as do most cons when talking about Silbert. "She's Mother Teresa," he says. "And the world I come from is Calcutta."

Growing up on the streets of East Palo Alto, Cooper was barely out of puberty when he first went astray. "Edward G. Robinson was my hero," he says, and he did his best to surpass Little Caesar. He began by knocking over phone companies, then graduated to banks. He abused drugs. He gunned down a man in a pool hall for spitting at him. He tried to kill his grandmother.

At last, two years ago, Cooper found his way to Delancey Street. "I don't want to hurt nobody no more," he says.

Delancey Street not only welcomed him, it housed him. Among its many functions, the restaurant serves as the "lobby" for a four-story apartment house in the Embarcadero, built by cons, where nearly 500 cons now reside.

Silbert, a divorced mother of two grown sons, lives onsite, and loves it, though she admits it's never quiet. Cons are fed, clothed and paid a small stipend, all from a general fund that also provides Silbert's pocket money: She takes no salary. Delancey Street prides itself on receiving no government aid, so everything comes from revenue or donations. (Brooks Brothers and Zegna have been particularly generous of late.)

In exchange for their basic needs being met, cons promise to work—hard. They put in long hours at the restaurant, and often at one of the other, smaller Delancey Street "business training schools," such as Christmas tree lots and moving companies. They also hit the books. Besides obtaining high school diplomas and college degrees, cons complete a liberal arts survey course designed by Silbert, which includes field trips to museums, recitals and ballets.

Delancey Street is the only program of its kind in the nation, Silbert says, and she's besieged each day by people wanting to copy it. There isn't time to answer all the requests, she complains. Besides, she designed Delancey Street on the fly, over 35 years, with help from experts, scholars, gourmets, friends. Occasionally, even a con's mother will donate a secret family recipe. It would take too long—a lifetime—to tell anyone all she's learned.

One core element of Delancey Street is the "dissipation," a grueling emotional purge that cons undergo after their first year. Cloistered for a weekend with a council of fellow cons, they describe all their darkest sins, minus any excuses. When they veer into self-pity or rationalization, Silbert or another facilitator pounces. Cons hate themselves when they arrive at Delancey Street, Silbert says, "but not enough."

Aubria Thompson, a 40-year-old former prostitute and heroin addict, has hated herself since she was molested as a little girl. Now she's learning to like herself, and to love Delancey Street unconditionally, so much so that she recently asked to extend her stay another two years.

Not yet ready for the outside world, Thompson also isn't ready for the main dining room.

Thus, she's been training at private dinners in the back. Last night she learned about the restaurant's computer system, and about the difference between Chardonnay and Cabernet, though she conflates them now and then into one word: "Carbonyay."

Each time Thompson learns something new, she beams. Her eyes sparkle behind her new glasses, provided by Delancey Street. (Never had glasses before, she says shyly—what was the point of seeing?) "I always thought I was a piece of [expletive]," Thompson says. "I'm really starting to feel human."

Thompson's partner in private dining is Gary Dockery, a 29-year-old former skinhead. Every time Thompson falls behind, Dockery happily picks up the slack. He is glad to help, eager, despite the fact that Thompson is African American, and Dockery once menaced African Americans for fun.

Why so helpful? Because Thompson spends her time outside the restaurant helping Dockery: She's his reading tutor. "Each one teach one," Dockery says, quoting a favorite Silbert maxim.

Dockery and Thompson get on so well, in fact, that she feels comfortable enough to ask about his tattoos, which curl like poison ivy from his collar and cuffs. Soberly, Dockery says the tattoos represent things he's done. Things he regrets. "My tattoos are a reminder of the person I don't want to be."

The dinner rush begins. A mother and son come in, alone, and their waiter is Kirk Chappell, a 52-year-old former drug addict and thief. The mother orders soup, the son orders salmon. They split a caramel cheesecake. Did they know before coming that their food would be prepared and served by felons? Or, like many customers, did they learn this fact from the restaurant's history on the back of the menu? (Cons get a big kick out of seeing customers study the menu, then look up and study their waiter's face with a mix of fear and awe.)

After the mother and son leave, Chappell talks about how tender they were with each other, how connected. Not long ago, he wouldn't have noticed, or if he had, he might have plotted how to prey on the pair. After 11 felony convictions, Chappell's heart was numb, and the sight of human kindness brought out his basest instinct. "One of the first things I noticed when I came here was people being so nice," he says. "I was thinking: I can take advantage of a lot of people in here."

Instead, Delancey Street got the better of Chappell. Before he knew what hit him, he was changing, and enjoying the change. "I've been through other programs," he says. "But Delancey Street is designed to give you a life."

Yes, Chappell says, as the hour grows late and the dining room thins out, it's been a long road to Delancey Street. Long day too. He looks beat. He started at 9 a.m., as did 27-year-old Ricardo Franco, though Franco looks as if he could do another 12-hour shift. Dancing around a table of nine women, he smiles and laughs and takes their dessert orders. Banana split? Tiramisu? No problem, ladies. He jots down each order on a tiny speck of paper cupped in his palm.

In prison, working “security” for his gang, Franco would jot down the names of rival gang members in the yard, tracking their movements and behavior. Then he’d secretly pass the speck of paper, covered with his microscopic writing, to his gang superiors. Now he uses that same microscopic writing to record dessert orders of suburban wives. The irony makes him laugh.

Everything makes Franco laugh these days. “I feel normal again,” he says, breathing deeply. “I can smell the air again.”

Just five years ago, he couldn’t have imagined such a zest for life. Arrested with a loaded gun, he had earned his third strike and faced life in prison. At his sentencing, he asked to address the judge. Palms sweating, he begged her for one last chance. Please, he said—send me to Delancey Street.

She scoffed.

He asked again. He pleaded. The judge took a long look at Franco—and relented. Though she sent him back to prison, she agreed to remove Franco’s third strike. She gave him three years more in jail, but also, she said, “the opportunity of a lifetime.”

The day Franco walked out of prison, two years ago, his mother drove him straight to Delancey Street. Now, besides working hard, Franco attends college, dreaming of becoming a firefighter.

Or maybe a lawyer? Occasionally he accompanies new cons on their court dates and speaks on their behalf, and he surprises himself with how eloquent he can be. (Public speaking courses at Delancey Street have helped immensely, he says.)

Recently, in court, wearing his coat and tie, Franco spotted the judge who spared his life. He ran after her, but she vanished down a hall. He picked up a courthouse phone and quickly dialed her office. Ricardo Franco, he said. You probably don’t remember me, but you gave me a second chance years ago, and I want you to know I’m at Delancey Street, I’ve turned my life around, kept my promise to you, and to myself.

“She seemed shocked,” he says, laughing, and it’s a shame Silbert isn’t around to hear. She must be busy somewhere with Amnesty. At the end of another long day at Delancey Street, she would surely find the sound of Franco’s carefree laughter more nourishing, more delicious, than even a perfect potato latke.