

San Francisco's
Cala stands
apart for both
its innovative
dishes and hir-
ing practices.

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The Good Food Issue

Bread that binds a community together, a coveted soup that cuts food waste, and a borscht recipe that's traveled from Ukraine to Kent, Washington—good food is about more than just taste.



Good



Food



To serve their communities, today's top culinary minds are reaching far beyond the kitchen.



The fine-dining restaurant cooking up second chances

By Rebecca Flint Marx

ON A RECENT AFTERNOON at Cala, a contemporary Mexican restaurant in San Francisco, Candace Hightower takes reservations while cooks prep for dinner service. Two women at the restaurant's lunchtime taco counter strip thorns from cactus leaves and fill cups with *agua fresca*. "Right around now," Hightower says with a grin, "it starts bumping."

In many respects, Cala isn't different from most other high-profile San Francisco restaurants: It serves sophisticated, beautifully executed food in a sophisticated, beautifully executed dining room. But unlike most San Francisco restaurants—or really, most restaurants anywhere—it recruits formerly incarcerated people to staff its dining room and kitchen. Nearly half of its 40-some employees have prison records. "We seek them out," says Emma Rosenbush, Cala's general manager. "I want them."





Gabriela Cámara (left), and her San Francisco restaurant Cala

Before she started working here, Hightower had never heard of a trout tostada, much less enjoyed one. She also never thought she'd apply for a job without getting judged for the felony DUI conviction on her record; when she'd tried in the past, things would get awkward. ("Oh, that position is no longer available," she recalls.) But at Cala, there wasn't any awkwardness; there was just opportunity. "And to have an opportunity without judgment," Hightower says, "was pretty amazing."

Opened in 2015, Cala is the first U.S. restaurant from Gabriela Cámara, a legendary restaurateur in her native Mexico City. Back in Mexico, Cámara says, she has never hesitated to hire people with troubled pasts. "In restaurants, you always hire people who have issues," she says. "Restaurants take everybody in." So when Rosenbush, who had previously worked in Berkeley's Prison Law Office, approached her about hiring people with conviction histories, Cámara was game. But her open-mindedness was born as much from pragmatism as compassion: Thanks to San Francisco's labor shortage and high cost of living, finding loyal employees is tough. "We needed people who could give good service," Cámara says. "It's not just

because I'm a good person. If you have staff who know how important they are, they're more likely to do a better job."

To find employees, Rosenbush and Cámara reached out to San Francisco's Adult Probation Department and the Delancey Street Foundation, a nonprofit that offers residential rehabilitation services and vocational training for substance abusers and ex-convicts. While some of their new staff had prior restaurant experience, one didn't know the difference between sparkling and still water. Another didn't know wine is made from grapes.

There were other challenges, such as the addiction issues some employees faced, as well as their need for services to help them readjust to regular working life. "All of a sudden, we were that support," Rosenbush says. "But we're a restaurant, not a social service." So she reached out to the rehabilitation community to build a better support network for Cala's employees. She and Cámara also decided to make Cala a dry restaurant (meaning employees can only drink there as guests) and adopted a hard-line stance in dealing with problems. "It's tough love," says Hightower. "Like, 'don't come here thinking this is a handout.' But it's love, it's all love."

As she spoke, the restaurant was suffused with light and the camaraderie of its employees. Watching them work, there was no way to know who had spent time in prison and who hadn't. And that's the point. "You come into Cala and you can't tell who is who," Cámara says. "You just have a bunch of lovely people wanting to take care of you."



The bar scene at Cala (top), and hostess Candace Hightower

