Cafe Momentum: Serving Second Chances
by Chris Peak

In the far southern outskirts of Dallas County, Chad Houser pulled off the I-45 highway, drove onto a dead-end road leading to several shooting ranges and made a quick right turn to his final destination: the Dallas County Youth Village, a non-secure juvenile detention facility for 10-to-17-year-old boys. Stepping out of his car, Houser, a chef at the acclaimed Dallas bistro Parigi, noticed a putrid stench rising from the nearby landfill and water treatment plant. He grabbed a bundle of fruits and herbs from his car and strode into the compound, where he planned to teach a class on making ice cream.

The whole ride over, Houser fretted about the disrespect and back talk he was about to endure, and he steeled himself as he signed in. But when he arrived in the kitchen, none of the eight boys were the tattooed toughs he’d expected. “I had stereotyped them before I even met them,” Houser recalls. “All eight looked at me when they spoke. They said, ‘Please,’ ‘Sir,’ and ‘Thank you.’” They all listened closely, he adds, eager for “a first-time feeling” of crafting something they could take pride in and savor.

After class, Houser hosted the kids at Dallas’s central farmers market, where all their ice cream flavors were entered into a competition. One of the boys took home first place and the $100 prize, beating out culinary students and trained professionals. The young man ran up to Houser and told him, “I just love to make food and give it to people and put a smile on their face.” “Wow,” Houser thought, amazed at this teen’s desire to use food to give joy to others. The young man continued, “When I get out of detention, I’m going to get a job in a restaurant.” But he had one question for which he wanted Houser’s input: “Sir, where do you think I should work?” Fast food like Wendy’s or casual dining like Chili’s? he asked. Houser paused before saying, “Sir, I think you should work for whomever hires you first.”

That exchange occurred in 2007, and Houser pondered it for more than a year, feeling helpless at first, then angry at the lack of opportunities for the young men trying to leave their mistakes behind. One night in 2009, as he was closing up Parigi after dinner service, he told his business partner he felt dishonest. A year had passed, and the boys at the Youth Village weren’t any better off. He felt like he’d broken a promise. “I just want to open a restaurant and let these kids run it,” he confessed. He wanted a place where kids could learn “more than how to cook.” He wanted them to gain life skills like personal responsibility, social skills and financial management. “I wanted them to be exposed to things they had never been exposed to,” Houser says. When his partner told him it sounded like a pretty good idea, he devoted all his energy to making the establishment a reality.

Chad Houser wanted a place where kids were “learning more than how to cook.” Courtesy
In 2011, Houser hosted his first pop-up dinner cooked by former juvenile offenders, a long awaited-moment where he “put knives and fire in front of these kids.” Within 15 minutes of prep, the fish he’d ordered was ruined and the smoke alarms were sounding. The staff recovered, and at the end of service, each one of the patrons shook Houser’s hand or gave him a hug and mentioned how closely the young workers resembled their own children. By late 2012, these 50-seat dinners, where proceeds went towards the boys’ wages and a mentoring program, were selling out within minutes, and Houser sold off his ownership in Parigi to pursue opening a restaurant that would employ young ex-offenders full-time. Café Momentum, which can host 150 diners nightly, opened in January 2015 with a baguette-cutting ceremony. This month, nine formerly incarcerated young men became the first to graduate from its first yearlong training program.

For almost all of them, the world of fine dining is an eye-opening experience. For one, there’s some sticker-shock that comes with glancing at the menu: a family ordering three mains (wagyu beef, $26; pork chops, $26; seared scallops, $23) spends as much in an hour as the employees earn in a full day’s work. But the more lasting impression is the taste of cuisine the boys never knew existed.

An appetizer prepared at Bolsa, a Chad Houser pop up restaurant from 2012. Courtesy of Café Momentum

“Most kids come from parts of town that are federally recognized food deserts, which means they don’t have access to grocery stores. These kids literally think that raspberry is a flavor of candy. They’ve never tasted it fresh,” Houser says. “And if raspberry was foreign, imagine having them smell fresh tarragon. It’s absolutely mind-blowing.”

That exposure to luxury may be foreign to these young ex-convicts, but Houser assures them that they deserve to be there. In addition to paying a $10 hourly wage (more than the state’s $7.25 minimum) over the 12-month post-release internship, Café Momentum offers intensive social services, including identifying permanent housing, medical attention, parenting classes and other case management. With those obstacles taken care of, Houser believes he’ll see the young men rise to the demanding expectations he set, which includes making everything from scratch — from the vinegars to the goat cheese. Even the bacon and pork chops are butchered from a whole pig, cut right from the whole animal in the kitchen. As the young men pick up various techniques, they also learn how to glean as much as they can from produce. Take a beet: it can be diced and cooked with coffee grounds, its root grounded up into a sugary powder or its leaves can be fermented into kimchi.

From the very first pop-up dinner, Houser realized that large receipts and fabulous food were well and good, but the most important aspect of dinner service would be breaking down stereotypes, in exactly the same way his conception of juvenile offenders was shattered the first time he met any. And that process, he adds, needs to happen on both sides of the table. Diners need to see that, with some support, these young men aren’t career criminals, and the workers need to see that the rest of the city wants them to succeed. In a city that has a long history of racial segregation, interaction between these two groups of people is rare outside the dining room. Yet, in the ritual of a multi-course meal, a bond is forged between the wait staff and customers and barriers come down.
For the young men in the program, however, needs are more immediate. Two interns working in the kitchen recently took a break from prep work to talk with NationSwell. They said the program’s most significant benefit was a stable income — something that’s hard to come by for most ex-offenders. “As long as I got money in my pocket, I don’t got no worries. That’s been the hardest thing, to even have a dollar in my pocket,” says Raymon, a 19-year-old who lives with his mom and four siblings. He politely declines to talk about why he ended up in jail in the first place: “Different person” was all he would say of his past. Today, he’s staffing the pastry station at Café Momentum. He doesn’t eat a lot of the restaurant’s food himself (“I’m really a burger type of person”), but he enjoys being around other employees who’ve gone through “the struggle.” To him, his boss, Houser, is “a cool dude,” he states. “He’s trying to make sure I stay out of trouble.”

So far, of the 150 youth who staffed the restaurant over the past 14 months, only five went back to jail (two because of a prior charge), Houser reports. That low recidivism rate is unheard of in Texas where 71.1 percent of juveniles are rearrested and 25.5 percent are reincarcerated within three years, according to state data. (Among the 172 kids who staffed Houser’s pop-up dinners and didn’t receive the same intensive social services, a slightly higher 11 percent were reincarcerated, still about half the state average.)

That’s not to say that getting a job at Café Momentum fixes all the problems. After release, the interns are usually living in the same neighborhoods, where they committed their first crime. Jose, 18, another intern living with his mom in West Dallas, started work in February, but says he faces a constant temptation to slip back into his old ways whenever he isn’t working. (When his friends seem interested in causing trouble, he tells them he has to go home.)

Houser says that self-doubt is common after the first few months of working in the program. Akin to the sophomore slump, the high of a brand new job has worn off, and the young men often begin to question whether the program is all it claims to be. “They’ve used to being deceived. They’re used to people overpromising and underdelivering,” he says. Once that phase ends, the boys become self-sufficient, Houser adds.

Chad Houser speaks to a restaurant full of family, friends and long-time supporters during Cafe Momentum’s inaugural graduation ceremony held April 3, 2016. Photo by Larry Young

It’s important to note that Houser has taken a key first step in employing these young men during that difficult year of post-release, but it remains to be seen whether their experience cooking at Café Momentum translates into long-term employment. When Jose finishes the internship, he is planning to look for a job in a hotel. Raymon is saving up for a place of his own. For his next job, he knows he’s a “good waiter” or “servant.” (He struggles to pick the right word, one without racial overtones.) But he also says, “That’s not a dream job.” At night, he thinks about being a cardiologist. Only time will tell whether the recidivism rates stay low for the entire three-year period over which they’re normally measured.

In talking with the boys, however, Houser believes that even the most hardened of the bunch seem to benefit from working at Café Momentum. The boys who were thrown back into jail for a second offense have all written Houser letters, explaining where they “tripped up” and how motivated they are not to return to jail a third time, he says. And earlier this month, a boy Houser thought would never make it through the program
graduated with the first class. Twelve months ago, Houser helped him off the streets and into stable housing. He made sure the young man had groceries and money to get to work. But for much of the first month, the employee wouldn’t show and didn’t call to explain why; when he did arrive, he was either stoned or defiant, Houser recalls. As the months went on, he grew more dependable. But there were still slip-ups, like the time he asked Houser for help after he got his girlfriend pregnant. A few days before graduation, the boy pulled Houser aside and asked if they could have another talk. From experience, Houser expected the teen was back in hot water.

“What’s going on?” Houser asked.

“Well, the boy said. “I want to give you a hug.”

“Okay,” Houser answered, unsure where this was leading.

“You’ve changed my life,” the boy said. “I’m serious.” He went on, “Last year, I knew I was going to prison, so I was preparing myself to go.” He confessed to Houser that, shortly after his release from juvie, he sold as many drugs as he could to ensure his mother’s finances would be sound, and he made gang connections to ensure he’d be protected once he was back in the slammer — a return he once believed was imminent. “But, you know, I’m never going to go to prison,” the boy said. “I’m not. I’m going to succeed, and I just wanted to say thank you.”

For these young men, life once looked like a series of lockups. But as Houser’s argued and as the graduates are now making clear, working in the kitchens of Café Momentum has given these young men a taste of a better future.