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EATING OUT

Service with a conviction

Arnie Wilson had always wanted to mix with criminals. He took his chance in San Francisco

The streets of San Francisco are packed with restaurants: at Pier 39, the inevitable Alcatraz Cafe and Grill, with "food so good it's criminal", even has a "genuine" Alcatraz jail cell. Equally intriguing are The Fly Trap and the Fog City Diner. But by far the most fascinating is Delancey Street.

At any given moment, California has about 120,000 people in jail. I was about to meet some who had reached a notable and significant half-way house in their rehabilitation - a last-chance saloon, you might say. Or, in this case, a restaurant.

Traffic was teeming across the Bay Bridge from Oakland as I wandered, a touch nervously, along the South Beach at Embarcadero, into Brannan Street. I passed a man squatting on the pavement with a sign declaring: "Why lie? It's for beer. Help The Beerless." And found myself entering the most extraordinary restaurant in town.

Endeavouring to appear cool and relaxed, I ordered salmon mousse with lemon dill cream sauce (\$4.95) and seared sea scallops with papaya and mango salsa and cold Szechwan noodles (\$10.50) before settling down and surreptitiously glancing at the staff.

They were all clean-cut and confident, eminently presentable, and seemed to epitomise the breed of well-trained waiters that one finds in good restaurants - yet my waiter was a convict

on parole.

Even the fragrant and freshly shampooed waitress who topped up my glass with water was a criminal. They all were. The staff were either on parole, probation or working in the restaurant as an alternative to yet another prison sentence.

"I had such a feeling of hopelessness that I committed crimes to go back to prison where at least I knew where I stood."

The Delancey Street Foundation has some 1,000 "residents", of whom a quarter are women. Its name comes from the street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan where immigrants, newly arrived in New York, lived at the turn of the century.

Although its headquarters is in San Francisco, it has branches in New Mexico, New York, North Carolina and Los Angeles. The minimum stay is two years, the average four.

"I know what prison does to people. It turns you into an animal."

The official visitors' guide to the Convention and Visitors Bureau avoids giving the game away, describing Delancey Street as San Francisco's friendliest restaurant with views of the waterfront and smiling service.

It fails to mention that the service is provided by gangsters, swindlers, violent robbers, burglars, muggers, prostitutes, rapists and even the odd murderer. On average, they have been con-

victed 18 times and served at least four prison sentences.

However the California Ski Industry Association, which recently helped organise a convention for America's National Ski Areas Association, was more candid in the *Guide to SF Eats* that it handed out to delegates.

"This is a very cool place," it said. "All the staff are ex-cons. The restaurant is part of the Delancey Street Foundation that rehabs prisoners.

"They run a trucking company, sell Christmas trees, and serve good food at very reasonable prices. Best value in town. Always busy. Closed Mondays."

Bob Roberts, executive director of the ski association, said: "We like it as a great restaurant, regardless of who the waiters are - or what they may have done."

"Now I'm starting to like who I'm becoming."

Mimi Halper Silbert, president of the Delancey Street Foundation, said: "The foundation is for people who have been shut out of the American Dream. Despite the violent and criminal

backgrounds of our residents, there has never been one arrest in the 28 years we have operated. Gang members once sworn to kill each other are now living and working together co-operatively and non-violently.

"Over 11,000 men and women have graduated into society as taxpaying citizens leading useful lives, including lawyers, and the medical professions." There is even a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the president of a housing commission, a deputy coroner and a deputy sheriff.

"I thank God every single night of my life that I made it to Delancey Street."

The restaurant's eclectic menu ranges from Caribbean to Thai to Moroccan. My scallops were delicious and the staff - who do not receive a salary - were polite, articulate and friendly. I did not even feel anxious when I dropped my knife and was swiftly handed another.

I smiled sweetly at my waiter. It was eye-to-eye contact - a fascinated customer briefly trying to tune in to the mind of a once-hardened criminal who had finally got sick of being in jail. He smiled back. What was going through his mind I had no idea. But I left a good tip.

Gang members once sworn to kill each other are now living and working together non-violently

■ Delancey Street, 600 Embarcadero Street, San Francisco 94107. Call +1 415-957 9800.