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THRIVING: Staffers at Delancey Street Restaurant in San Francisco are ex-cons and recovering addicts.

It's the place for second chances

As I ponder the most beautiful places I've visited in America, my head fills with visions of the rocky Maine coast in summer, when long days ease into evenings of buttery soft-shelled lobster and chilled white wine. My mind sees the Northwest in winter, when wild Pacific storms lash century-old pines that cling tenaciously to basalt bluffs –

and I get to watch the show from a window seat by a blazing hearth. But when I think of America, my beautiful, there's another place that captures my heart and soul: Delancey Street Restaurant in San Francisco.

The restaurant is operated by ex-cons and recovering addicts who live and work at the Delancey Street Foundation's residential treatment facility on the South Beach Embarcadero. The 40-year-old program thrives against all odds: It doesn't receive government funding. Residents don't pay to attend; they apply. There are no professional counselors or other paid staff members.

The former gangbangers, dropouts and others who've hit rock bottom do it all. They built the block-long complex that's their bay-front home. They counsel and train one another and run a dozen successful businesses, including the largest moving company in Northern California, a trendy bookstore-café, a first-class catering company and the exceptional Delancey Street Restaurant.

When I think of the restaurant, I envision myself sitting on its patio at night, with the twinkling lights of the Bay Bridge just over my dinner companion's shoulder. I hear the murmur of conversation from other tables and inhale the scent of garlic rising from my Creole gumbo. It's easy to forget where I am until a meticulously groomed waiter, in tailored black pants and white long-sleeved shirt, approaches to refill my water glass, and I catch a glimpse of a jailhouse tattoo edging out from under his shirt cuff.

But the image I see most clearly when I think of Delancey Street Restaurant is the face of my daughter, Kim: strong, happy, healthy and beautiful, an accomplished executive, an extraordinary wife and mother. Kim was a Delancey Street resident for 10 years.

