

Incarcerated to inspired: People in a Virginia jail are training for careers in restaurants

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Matthew Painter never had much of an opportunity for employment before, let alone a culinary career.

The 39-year-old Waynesboro native, who once dreamed of becoming a youth pastor, spent almost 17 years of his adult life behind bars, checking in and out of prisons throughout southwestern and central Virginia. Prior to winding up at Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, he briefly worked for a moving company, but that was it.

And yet, this past summer, Painter and four other men at ACRJ somehow pulled off an entire tasting menu worthy of a team of restaurant chefs.

As newly minted graduates of [The Phoenix Program](#), a culinary training course that operates out of the prison, the dinner held on June 28 gave them a chance to demonstrate the skills they had acquired through the six-week program. Friends, family and community leaders were invited to partake in the festivities, which culminated with a graduation ceremony.

The program participants huddled around a long folding table set up in the prison rec room, as they put finishing touches on their dishes. Their instructor, Charlottesville [chef Antwon Brinson](#), coached them from the sidelines. "Communicate with one another," he reminded the men. "And reset your stations."

Throughout the meal, they took turns presenting course after course of skillfully plated fare. A crostini of grilled summer corn, then a Caesar salad crowned with parmesan tulle. Next a thyme-roasted chicken nested over barley risotto. And lastly, a sourdough bread pudding lavished in crème anglaise. Not the kind of food one would expect to find in a prison basement.

"This is fine dining right here," a satisfied guest declared as the dinner concluded.

Painter couldn't have been prouder. "I definitely went in cooking in the microwave," he said. "Now I'm able to cook just about anything, I would think."

The Phoenix Program began in 2019, in partnership with the city of Charlottesville's Office of Economic Development and ACRJ.

Brinson came up with the concept after working with a number of previously incarcerated individuals through existing workforce training programs offered by his company, [Culinary Concepts AB](#). What he had seen were folks who faced so many rejections and setbacks after their release, often because of their incarcerated status, that, by the time he met them, they were discouraged from even trying to pursue a serious culinary career.

“(They) would only go to the really low-end restaurants for employment because they thought that they weren't good enough to be able to get jobs in the nicer restaurants,” Brinson said. “And there was nothing I could do about that because that feeling in their mind already existed.”

What if, he wondered, they brought the same training into the prison? That could do more to erode those barriers, even the playing field for those individuals, and empower them with the skills and the mindset critical to their success before going home.

Additionally, it might give them a clearer path forward, mitigating the risk of recidivism that, in Virginia, lands at least 1 in every 5 people back in prison within three years of their release.

The first round of Phoenix Program graduates was a group of women at ACRJ. COVID-19, unfortunately, derailed it, along with all other in-person programming offered by the prison. But Brinson and ACRJ program director Olivia Dillon were finally able to get things back up and running in 2022. Painter's cohort is now their third graduating class.

A handful of individuals are chosen each year through a formal application and interview process. The ideal candidates are ones with scheduled release dates that coincide with the timing of the program. (All but one of the men in the latest group are slated to return home in the next six months, according to Dillon.)

Program participants meet three times a week, from 4 to 9 p.m. Led by Brinson, every session begins with classroom instruction, followed by hands-on training in the prison kitchen after normal business hours. Like Painter, folks generally do not go into the program with a culinary background under their belt.

The program is, in part, vocational. Students master techniques and learn their way around the kitchen, well enough to earn two nationally recognized culinary certifications by the conclusion of their studies, which hopefully will make them more employable. But it also includes a mix of life coaching and personal therapy.

“Our program is inclusive; it’s a conversation,” Brinson explained. “And through that conversation, the curriculum is kind of woven in between.”

During the sessions, Brinson pushes students to self-reflect and hone other life skills, like goal setting, teamwork, problem solving, communication and time management, while identifying their core strengths. The goal is for those coming out of the program to gain confidence in themselves to realize their own potential, both in the culinary field and in life.

“I really want people to think differently about how they can achieve success in their own lives — through hospitality,” he said.

Beyond simply laying the groundwork prior to their release from incarceration, Brinson and his team also build a bridge for Phoenix Program graduates to cross once they do leave ACRJ.

Culinary Concepts AB, through relationships it has cultivated with businesses in the greater Charlottesville area, connects graduates with job opportunities in the hospitality industry, many of which would not exist without the backing of Brinson’s organization.

“I sit down with all of the employers that we have as partners. ... I’m very clear on our mission and what we’re trying to do,” Brinson said. “And the employers that work with us, they get that. They believe that. And they’re all about creating equitable opportunities.”

Thanks to him, there’s now a diverse and expansive network of employers committed to hiring previously incarcerated individuals — from traditional restaurants to bakeries, university dining halls to catering companies, retirement community kitchens to social clubs. This, in turn, allows those individuals to find jobs tailored to their strengths, where they can actually flourish.

Program participants, upon their release, are encouraged do short internships, called “job trails,” with three or more of these in-network employers, which are individually curated. Sometimes the experience works out, sometimes it doesn’t. But the idea is that, by the end of it, they will find something that’s right for them.

Brinson’s program does not just benefit the people who participate in it. It also benefits the businesses they end up working for.

Virginia Secretary of Labor George “Bryan” Slater, who first connected with Brinson at a local workforce development board meeting and attended the Phoenix Program graduation dinner as the evening’s keynote speaker, estimates that there are currently

more than 300,000 job openings in Virginia. A significant proportion are in the areas of restaurant, lodging and travel.

“They’re having a hard time finding and keeping people,” he said. “It’s a significant shortfall.”

According to the results of a National Restaurant Association survey released in December, 56% of restaurant operators in Virginia report that they do not have enough employees to support their businesses; 79% report the existence of vacancies that have been hard to fill.

Plans are already underway to reproduce the Phoenix Program statewide, beginning with Richmond. Most recently, on Aug. 4, Culinary Concepts AB announced a new partnership with Hatch Richmond, an incubator for local food and beverage businesses. And Brinson intends to use this to start establishing a network of Richmond-area employers to support the program’s expansion.

There has been some interest in eventually bringing the program to other states as well.

“I genuinely believe, once we get Virginia locked down, we have the blueprint to be able to take this national,” Brinson said.

For Brinson, helping folks get their lives back on track is something that is deeply personal to him.

Though the chef later went on to become a graduate of the prestigious Culinary Institute of America and a semifinalist on HBO Max’s “The Big Brunch,” Brinson started out in life as the child of a single mother in the small town of Niagara Falls, New York. There, he quickly fell in with the wrong crowd, left home as a teenager and got into trouble with the justice system.

“The people we looked up to, they weren’t athletes. They were the guys on the block,” Brinson recounted. “So naturally, coming up, those are your role models, you get pulled into the streets. And I had a hard road growing up.”

It was only after getting arrested again on gun charges at the age of 17 and facing up to 25 years in prison that he personally decided to make a change.

“I was like, if I’m able to get through this, I’m going to take whatever I got left and I’m going to put myself through college. I’m going to do something with my life,” Brinson said. “And by the grace of God, I overcame that situation and I made it out.”

Most of his childhood friends weren’t so lucky, he added. “Everybody else is either dead, they’re still there, or they’re locked up.”

At the dinner event earlier this summer, Phoenix Program graduates attested to the impact that the training already had on their lives.

“I’ve got a clear goal of what I want to accomplish. And this man has given me the path,” said Billy Ross, a graduate hailing from Bristol, as he pointed to Brinson. “These stripes don’t dictate me.”

Phillip Guiles, another graduate, spoke of personal growth and learning to cope with hardship. “The things I’ve learned in this program have changed my outlook on life,” he shared with the group.

As for Painter, who was just released from ACRJ in July, the program has granted him a newfound sense of hope and determination.

“It means everything to me because now I have somewhat of a foundation to get out and stand on,” he said. “I’m willing to go out there with an open mind and just do whatever it is that I need to do to make my future brighter and make my future better.”