



Second-chance cafe

An L.A. restaurateur helps former gang members get their lives back on track

BY MARIA FINN | *Sunset*, November 2010

Homegirl Café in L.A.'s Chinatown is like a lot of restaurants downtown-chic, airy, with a kitchen garden out back and an organic emphasis in its contemporary Mexican food. But look closer at the menu and you'll find, right below the listings of breakfast chilaquiles and linguine with jalapeño pesto, intriguing stories about the women who work here:

- Shayna is now a lead server and graduated from computer school.
- Alisha has her daughter back and is attending culinary school in the fall.
- Stephanie is interning at Border Grill restaurant and boxing.

That's because Homegirl Café is more than just a place to get a taco: It's also where women who are former gang members or at risk of joining a gang can get job training and restaurant skills like cooking, barista experience, and even gardening.

The woman behind the restaurant is Patricia Zarate, who originally owned a tiny cafe in Boyle Heights, one of the toughest neighborhoods in L.A. Through her church she met Father Gregory Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries, which started in the 1980s as a single bakery that employed at-risk youth and now includes tattoo removal, GED classes, and counselors for former gang members. After learning about Father Gregory's work, Zarate agreed to hire and train women who might otherwise be pulled into gangs.

Since then, the cafe has moved and is now an official part of the Homeboy Industries nonprofit. And at a time when many of the organization's services are being cut back, the cafe is still going strong: This year, it teamed up with Urban Farming, Metabolic Studio, and Woolly Pocket to create a vertical garden for the kitchen and, in a bit of a Cinderella story, a major supermarket chain is in talks to carry its salsa.

Glenda Alvarenga, who came to the cafe in 2007, started out washing dishes, but moved up to cook and then wanted to work in the garden. She and Zarate are creating a menu of salads and soups exclusively from the garden. "This is fun. You get to talk to plants, even though they don't answer you back," says Alvarenga, whose dream is to one day own her own restaurant and cook with veggies from its garden.

Many other women here have plans for the future, and the idea is for them to move onward when they are ready so that others can take their place. "We have hundreds of women on our waiting list hoping to get in," says Zarate. "Almost everyone here has children, and they are truly motivated to improve their lives." Just ask Adela Juarez, a hostess who is having her tattoos laser-removed and hopes to attend college to be a drug counselor. "My kids are so proud. Every day they ask me, 'Was there any drama?' 'How much did you get in tips?'"

The studies are still in the works when it comes to Homegirl's success rate, but in a state with the highest recidivism rate in the nation (an astonishing 70 percent of those incarcerated return to prison), this cafe gives women a second chance.

INFO homeboy-industries.org

RESTAURANTS THAT GIVE BACK

It's the season of giving... and meals here help homeless and at-risk populations



Los Angeles

Every month, the cafe hosts cooking classes or community events with live music and chef demonstrations. fo for breakfast and lunch on weekdays; Saturdays, the staff serves a superlative brunch. \$; *closed Sun; 130 W. Bruno St.; 213/617-0380*



Seattle

FareStart trains the homeless as restaurant workers and gives meals to Head Start and shelters (its sister cafe trains baristas). Try weekdays for lunch of Thursday nights for a guest-chef dinner. \$; *closed Sat-Sun; 700 Virginia St.; 206/267-7606*



Sacramento

St. John's Shelter trains homeless mothers in the restaurant and hospitality industries. Drop by for the quiche Lorraine. \$, *closed Sat-Sun; 14 Business Park Way; 916/381-2233*



San Francisco

Browse books or meet friends in the outdoor garden over breakfast or lunch. This favorite in the SoMa neighborhood helps homeless and other vulnerable populations with job training. \$; *699 Delancey St.; 415/512-5111*