

Right said Fred

As the Right Course charity prepares to expand, its founder Fred Sirieix explains to *Rosalind Mullen* how and why the industry should support serving prisoners training in hospitality skills as a source of talent

Fred Sirieix moved on from his role as a celebrated general manager at Galvin at Windows in 2020, but even as the star of TV shows such as *Gordon*, *Gino & Fred's Road Trip* and *First Dates* he remains passionate about the hospitality industry.

In fact, he is driving the roll-out of another of his passions, the Right Course charity, which he set up to give serving prisoners industry-recognised qualifications and to help find them jobs on their release so they escape the cycle of reoffending.

"The statistic is that 50% [of released prisoners] would reoffend within six months to a year," says Sirieix. "The key part of not reoffending is to have a job...It is about education, training and improving self-belief. It is also about them making the effort and having the realisation that they need to do something different."

The double "no-brainer" for Sirieix is that the programme not only helps people to transition to life after prison, it can also ease the industry's skills gap.

"We have a big staff shortage in this industry,"

"It is about education, training, and improving their self-belief"

Fred Sirieix

he says (*see panel*). "People aren't coming from the EU because of Brexit and they're not coming from this country because there is no investment in professional education and because it is considered low-skilled. But the prisoners are there. It's so simple to train them."

Unlike the Clink Charity, which runs public-facing restaurants to train prisoners, the Right Course transforms prison staff restaurants into high-street-style operations where inmates work towards City & Guilds NVQ Level 2

qualifications in areas such as front of house, catering, food production or as a barista.

Sirieix launched the first training restaurant in 2017 at category C HMP Isis at Thamesmead with the DM Thomas Foundation for Young People. A second, also London-based, opened in 2021 at HMP Wormwood Scrubs and a third is soon to open at HMP Berwyn in Wales. And it won't stop there. Working with the charity's chief executive, Simon Sheehan, and trustees Charlie McVeigh and Michele Caggianese, he is ready to roll the programme out across the UK, starting with the opening of five training restaurants this year.

"There are about 90 prisons in the UK and let's say 50 are suitable," says Sirieix. "There's a staff mess in every prison [so] why not run it as a training restaurant?"

Sirieix says the best results will be seen when the scheme is adopted at scale. "The ideal situation would be if the Ministry of Justice decided to roll this out as a national project. The only way to see the result of training people is at pace. It will have a halo effect and solve the staff shortage and stop people reoffending. For me, it's a no-brainer."

Dream scheme

The training formula is certainly in place. Inmates apply and are interviewed for the scheme, completing it within six months from release. Numbers vary, but at Wormwood Scrubs there are 10 students at a time and the



How to get involved with the Right Course

Businesses can support the programme in a number of ways. As well as recruiting the trained ex-offenders, they can take masterclasses, volunteer as trainers, or make donations of funds, expertise or equipment. Organisations and employers that are involved to date include Gauchó, Galvin at Windows, Hilton, Only a Pavement Away, Greene King, Old Spike, Wood and Water and Hawksmoor.

Some 59% of those who trained at the Escape restaurant at HMP Wormwood Scrubs have found employment (which equates to 83% of those who are in contact, with a further 22% currently seeking employment).

While ex-prisoners do not need to disclose their status, the Right Course team accept that some employers may be uncomfortable if they know a candidate has been trained by the charity. Their response is to urge the industry to give back to disadvantaged communities.

"Generally, if you end up in prison for a minor crime it means you've fallen through the cracks of society, and this is a way of helping them to become part of society," says McVeigh.

Sheehan adds: "When employers advertise vacancies, half of the candidates don't turn up. But our candidates do turn up because they want the opportunity. It is about changing their perception and saying: 'There are people out there who will give you a job. Yes, you need to perform, but they will give you an opportunity'. And then you see a lightbulb go on."

www.therightcourse.org.uk

Simon Sheehan and Fred Sirieix



site, which includes a café as well as a sit-down restaurant, sees about 100 covers a day.

"The people we train have committed minor offences and are in prison for a limited time, and most are young, under 40," says Sirieix.

Prison education partner Novus oversees the assessment and delivery of the NVQs, but the on-the-job training is undertaken by a chef and a manager. As government employees, the terms of work, pension and pay are "pretty good", with hours closer to 9-5 Monday to Friday than the industry norm of long shifts. Even so, finding people with the qualities to be both a leader and an educator in those roles can be a challenge – and one that has partly delayed the opening at HMP Berwyn.

"The idea is to run a restaurant with someone at the helm who inspires [the trainee] to be the best. It relies on the manager and the chef. It is about showing people, day-in and day-out, how to deliver good hospitality. Only then will people do it instinctively," says Sirieix.

The programme is governed by values including hard work, respect and ownership and includes the measurement of behaviours and attitudes. This is not accredited, but employers often find it more useful to assess a candidates' potential and then sharpen up any skills on the job.

Key to inspiring the trainees are industry professionals who are invited to do a service or a masterclass with the inmates. Sirieix often gives tutorials, as does Caggianese, a trustee and



View from an employer



When April Jackson, chef-restaurateur of Brixton's Wood and Water received a message out of the blue inviting her to see what the Right Course was achieving at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, she was already open to the idea of employing an ex-offender at her 44-seat Brixton restaurant.

"I'd been to the Clink in Brixton years ago as a paying guest and I wanted the opportunity to hire guys coming out, but it never happened," says Jackson.

After an initial visit to see the work of the Right Course charity, Jackson returned to the prison to do a tutorial. One of the inmates she met told her that he was soon to be released, but was dreading visiting a Job Centre, so she offered him a trial at her £55-a-head restaurant, and it worked out well. As Jackson says, "he turns up with the right attitude and does the job".

For her, it's about giving a fresh chance to people who may have had a disadvantaged life. "I come from Jamaica, where doing charity and community service is part of our school curriculum," says Jackson.

As a satisfied employer, she urges others to consider recruiting Right Course graduates. "I would 100% take on more ex-offenders if I could, but I run a small place. I hope that larger institutions will get onboard. I really believe in the programme. I know the power of work, and the idea that someone would leave prison and be lost and don't know what might happen to them is terrible."



Simon Sheehan, Michele Caggianese, Fred Sirieix and Charlie McVeigh

as the Hilton in the Community Foundation, and McVeigh, a hospitality entrepreneur, lend weight. Mostly, they are looking at category C and D prisons and expansion will include young offender's prisons and women's prisons – in fact, Sheehan has just visited HMP Styal in Cheshire.

Stand-up service

With a mantra to create a realistic, high-quality training environment, their challenge is finding prisons with the right space to offer a busy, sit-down service.

"They need to be busy so the trainees get the right experience, and it needs to be a nice environment where the staff want to spend their money," says Sheehan.

Sirieix agrees: "I can't teach them to be good at their job if the business isn't set up to deliver a great customer experience. But we have to do it with the budget we have."

That's why fundraising and collaboration from partners is crucial. And it's where the industry can help (see panel on page 19). For instance, HMP Berwyn needed a new kitchen and restaurant and benefited from donations from Design LSM among others. Investment to create Escape restaurant at Wormwood Scrubs included a donation from payment system Lightspeed and a £108,000 injection from the Mayor of London's Skills for Londoners Capital Fund. Other partners have included Bunzl, Paragon and Pastaio.

"It humanises the relationship between prisoner and staff"

Charlie McVeigh

A further problem is red tape. McVeigh says there is a "huge appetite" in the prison sector to support the charity, but explains: "We are ready to open five [this year]. Whether we will get five over the line with all the necessary bureaucracy is another matter."

This is understandably frustrating, particularly as prison staff benefit as much as the trainees. "Take Wormwood Scrubs, where the halo effect is extraordinary," says Sirieix. "For the boys who work there they don't feel they are in prison, and for the customers – whether the guards or contractors – it is like an oasis in this austere Victorian prison. It just generates happiness when you walk in."

McVeigh adds: "It's hard to recruit prison staff and so having the restaurant in the prison is a fantastic tool. And it humanises the relationship between prisoner and staff – though, yes, some

Industry focus: Fred Sirieix

With a CV bristling with high-profile front-of-house roles at La Tante Claire, Le Gavroche and Galvin at Windows, French-born Fred Sirieix has done time in this industry. So, in a climate where "you can't find staff for love nor money", what does he believe needs to change?

Invest funds in education

"In the UK, education needs investment. There were 280 catering colleges 20 years ago and now we have 120-130, depending on how you qualify a catering college. And we've got to take people early. I would build it into the curriculum

in primary and secondary schools. If you teach people in the right way one or two may go on to work in the industry."

Invest time into the apprenticeship scheme

"There is a high drop-out rate, in some cases because youngsters feel they are being used as cheap labour. Employers need to take the time to train apprentices properly. There is an apprenticeship called CAP in France. You work three weeks in a business and one week in school for three years and at the end you take an exam and get a qualification."



staff may have bias in not wanting to go there."

Happily, two of the next five prison restaurants are on target to open this year. One is at HMP Pentonville, where the charity is working with Only a Pavement Away and employment partner Gaucho.

"It's at planning stage, so we need to secure funding for the air-conditioning system to be able to proceed," says Sheehan. "Once we've identified sources for this, we can open in the third quarter of 2023."

Closer to fruition is the restaurant at HMP Lincoln, which is slated to open in April. The Ivy has donated chairs, but Sheehan says they are still looking for donations of £15,000-£20,000 to cover some kitchen equipment, furniture, soft furnishings and set-up costs.

Looking ahead, the team are unlikely to follow the fine-dining public-facing formula used by the Clink. "The locations are different," says McVeigh. "I don't think it would work in a prison such as Berwyn, which is in the middle of nowhere. The Clink model is good, but for us this is more scalable."

And so, the Right Course is on its way, with the team pledged to find their protégés jobs and support them as needed. Ironically, getting a job through the charity will flash up their ex-prisoner status, which they normally wouldn't have to disclose. But Sirieix has the last word: "There's a stigma attached to being an ex-prisoner, but actually many people at work have a criminal record, while others never get caught. Our society has values of forgiveness, but when we are faced with showing it, what do we do?"

Sort out tipping

"We shot ourselves in the foot during the pandemic when people were furloughed at 80% of their salary and tips were not included. What other industry pays its staff through the generosity of patrons?"

Give the industry one voice

"We don't have one voice that represents the 3.2 million people who work in this industry. Instead, separate bodies represent each sector or even job role. This is different to other industries. For me, there is a lack of vision."

Improve the industry's reputation

"Would you as a parent recommend your child goes into hospitality as a career? We need to do a clean-up on the marketing. The service charge issue doesn't resonate with people and the government says the industry is 'unskilled'. It is demeaning. Who wants their kids to work somewhere badly paid with long hours?"

"You can't run a restaurant on eight hours a day, but there needs to be a balance. There are many different pieces – it is a war and we can't fight just one battle, we need to fight them all at the same time. If you don't do it, in 10-20 years will we still be here?"