

COOL COMPANIES

On a mission to satisfy a hunger for knowledge

Company name Charcoal Lane.

Among the trendy fashion shops and popular restaurants of Melbourne's Gertrude Street precinct, one contemporary restaurant aims to serve more than modern indigenous Australian cuisine.

"Charcoal Lane is a social enterprise of Mission Australia. It's a training facility that provides opportunities for local indigenous and disengaged youth," says hospitality-service manager Jesse Bridge.

Founded in 2009 in response to the rising number of disengaged indigenous youth in and around Melbourne, even the home of this project was carefully selected.

"The restaurant is located in a historic building with very important ties to the local indigenous community," Bridge says.

"It was originally a meeting place where local elders came to share stories, and the location remains of great significance."

INITIATIVES

- ▶ Out of the hundreds of non-profit programs run by Mission Australia, Charcoal Lane is its only full-service restaurant.
- ▶ Its goal is to provide opportunities and qualifications for local indigenous and disengaged youth.
- ▶ Youth support workers on-site (in upstairs offices) help trainees overcome personal problems such as drug and alcohol abuse.
- ▶ Twelve to 24 trainees participate at any given time, completing certificates in hospitality (commercial cookery or kitchen operations) while undertaking paid work in the restaurant.
- ▶ The team hosts free local barbecues to connect with, and give back to, the community, particularly residents in the housing commission opposite.
- ▶ Trainees do the cooking.
- ▶ The restaurant's success has allowed it to expand to also support non-indigenous disengaged youth.
- ▶ The menu showcases the natural beauty of native Australian food, with particular emphasis on Victorian produce.



Ready to serve: Jesse Bridge finds joy in training disengaged youth. Photo: Simon Schluter

- ▶ Trainees connect with local farms and vineyards via foraging expeditions.
- ▶ Partnership with hotel chain Accor and visits from guest chefs provide trainees with exposure to experienced professionals.
- ▶ Trainees are encouraged to take advantage of working both front-of-house and back-of-house positions to develop a broader skill-set upon graduation.

While Victorian food is the obvious star of the show, it has become apparent that changes in seasons affect more than just the menu at Charcoal Lane.

"Front-of-house trainees are usually timid and quiet when they start, and won't interact with guests," Bridge says. "Over the 18 months they are here, that really changes."

SUE WHITE