

Alex Head works with a number of charities to support prisoners with their rehabilitation



The supper clubs at The Social Pantry sound like great fun. ‘We used to say “drink until you’re dancing on the tables!” – but then we had a rugby team in, and since then I haven’t encouraged that so much,’ Alex Head, founder of The Social Pantry, laughs. They must be doing something right with their brunch too, judging by the queues outside at the weekends. ‘It’s gone avocado crazy,’ she admits. Named as one of About Time’s Top 50 Women to Watch in the Food Industry this year, Head has an admirable work-hard, play-hard attitude, and an indomitable passion for her food. I caught up with her over cappuccinos and pecan brownies from Brixton prison’s Bad Boys Bakery at her café on Lavender Hill to find out what makes her tick...

What is The Social Pantry all about?

Obviously we’ve got the café, but the catering came first. We cater for anything from private family dinners to corporates and high-end fashion clients. Recently we did a product launch for NARS make-up, and everything had to be blush-coloured. We served up peach bellini cocktails, and sundried tomato mousses.

Does working with charities makes you stand out from the crowd?

Yes – I could bore you for hours about it! We work with Bad Boys Bakery at the prison and a charity called Key4Life, which helps prisoners to rehabilitate themselves. Prisoners who are released on temporary licence (ROTL) come here and go back at night. If they’ve been incarcerated for a long time, it’s so key – otherwise it can be really quite challenging coming out. I personally always think that people deserve a second chance, and I was really quite naughty growing up – which is probably why I started a sandwich business. The Bad Boys Bakery is a social enterprise and they can leave with new qualifications. We went there for

A SOCIAL AFFAIR

Alex Head, the entrepreneur and caterer behind The Social Pantry, on food, fun and frolics

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

breakfast recently and they were so proud of what they had made. We got given a whole array of treats. One of them had come up with a recipe for potato bread and we were chatting about how therapeutic it is. The brownies are really good. I love the fact that sometimes we'll be working with mega high-end fashion clients alongside that – it's great to have people on totally different paths in life supporting each other.

What led you to found The Social Pantry, and what makes you so passionate about food?

I started out flogging sandwiches when I was about 15, growing up in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Anything to get out of revision really. That ignited my business ambition – but I've always grown up around food in a big family. It's always been a big part of my life. I was a chef for a couple of years in Oxford which taught me the trade, and trained at Darina Allen's Ballymaloe Cookery School. It's really prestigious and it's in this gorgeous country house in Cork. It's dreamy. There's chicken and pigs and herb gardens that roll on forever. It's been quite an organic journey – I started from nothing really and that's how Social Pantry has grown. With companies that start with plenty of investment and expertise have a completely different route to somebody that starts with no money, a bicycle, and reinvesting everything back in.

Our food is naturally healthy, which comes from using seasonal ingredients

How would you describe your food and your style of cooking at the café?

My food at the café is quite accessible. It's not intimidating in any way, it's not too fancy. It's wholesome, seasonal, and colourful and obviously just quite delicious. Our food is naturally healthy, which comes from using seasonal ingredients, but it's mixed in with some really indulgent treats. Sometimes you want a light salad, but sometimes you might want to reward yourself. It's also about being sociable – hence The Social Pantry. I used to love setting people up on dates – I've got a few marriages under my belt – and the name also relates to our work with the charities. Everyone gets quite merry at our supper clubs, with sharing platters down one table. It's a chance to meet new people and have a fun night out. For me, the rise of supper clubs in London is a really significant development.

In January after the indulgence of the festive season, what are your favourite dishes?

January for me is slightly lighter – less about the chocolate and carbs. I love cheese and bread and December is all about that, so in January I like to mix some root vegetables with filling grains, or just do roast chicken and use the stock to make a pearl barley risotto. All my food is quite easy and resourceful.

What are your other favourite haunts locally, and what drew you to the area?

It's not Shoreditch or Soho, but there's some real hidden gems around here. Battersea Arts Centre is our neighbour. I love MILK in Balham. They've got a really distinctive style, and I really like the counter at Flotsam and Jetsam up in Wandsworth too. Salon in Brixton Market is really cool. It's quite a quirky layout and their set menu is delicious. In the summer I had a coconut and strawberry frozen dessert which really inspired me. They're just doing quite fun things, as is The Dairy in Clapham. Those boys are killing it. Slightly further afield, I love the Typing Room in East London. London's so fun at the moment, there's so much good food around. I draw inspiration from other chefs and then I'll create the non-fussy version. We're not fine dining and we don't claim to be – we're just good seasonal food that suits everybody.

170A Lavender Hill SW11 5TG; 020 7924 4066; socialpantry.co.uk



The Social Pantry serves up seasonal food