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## EXCLUSIVE: New restaurant at Findlay Market will help address critical worker shortage

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A new restaurant at Findlay Market is partnering with CityLink to help address Cincinnati's critical shortage of food industry workers.

Social OTR is coming to 1819 Elm St. in Over-the-Rhine, a block from the historic Findlay Market. The goal is to be open by November or December.

Social OTR is more than just the name of the restaurant, it's tied to the philosophy of both the eatery and the program behind it, which will partner with CityLink to train up people who might otherwise experience high barriers to employment to work in Cincinnati's kitchens.

"There are people in this city looking for employment, and there's this large group of jobs, but for some reason they're not connecting," Social OTR general manager [Anthony Berin](#) told me. "Maybe we can help bridge that gap a little bit."

First, the restaurant: Social OTR will be a restaurant in two segments. The front of the building will house two long, communal dining tables and a full bar along with smaller tables in the storefront windows. There will also be seasonal tables on a fenced-in patio in front of the restaurant.

An "alley" will connect the dining room to a lounge in the back of the building, which can also be accessed from outside. The lounge will serve as additional seating for the restaurant but also have a different vibe with its own bar. It will remain open later than the restaurant to accommodate people who want to stay out for a nightcap after dinner service is over.

Social OTR's menu, which is still in development, will consist exclusively of small plates, with diners encouraged to share amongst one another.

What makes Social OTR unique is that its back-of-house staff is almost entirely made up of students. That's where the partnership with CityLink comes into play.

Social OTR has been in the works for about 18 months. The *Courier* first reported on it in February 2017, back when CityLink was piloting what would eventually become the restaurant.



PROVIDED BY THE CORPORATION FOR FINDLAY MARKET  
Anthony Berin is the general manager of Social OTR and former manager of the Findlay Kitchen.

CityLink, in conjunction with its partner organizations, helps students learn soft skills needed for success, including financial literacy, workplace norms, timeliness, conflict resolution, workplace expectations and attitude in the workplace. If students show an interest and aptitude, they will be offered the chance to also learn culinary skills in demand by local restaurants.

Students in the culinary program will learn product and equipment identification, knife skills and techniques. Berin said the recipes made at Social OTR will be crafted to reinforce those techniques.

"We don't want to teach recipes, we want to instill an understanding of why we do it this way so they can take those skills and adapt them to different restaurant situations," Berin said.

It started with the pilot early last year. Nine students went through a four-week culinary and life skills training program, and then the next four weeks were spent working at a pop-up restaurant in the Findlay Kitchen three nights a week, twice a night. Seven of those students were placed into restaurants after the end of that pilot and five are still in the industry.

It showed Berin and the teams from CityLink and Findlay Market that the concept works.

It's being expanded with the launch of Social OTR, taking in 10 to 12 students at a time to go through the four-week course. That is considered their "freshman" term. Following that, they enter the kitchen at Social OTR as "sophomores" for three months, each considered another term. The "senior" students are expected to help train the incoming "sophomores."

Those students will largely help train one another, but they will be assisted by Berin and an executive chef, whom the restaurant is currently working to hire. There will initially be a small team of sous chefs and lead cooks to help, but the goal is to eventually have the "senior" students assume training of the underclassmen.

The restaurant will initially be staffed by a professional front-of-house team, but the goal is to eventually open a sister program to help train servers, hosts and bartenders.

To assist in opening Social OTR and further its mission, the restaurant has launched a Kickstarter campaign called Share at Social with a goal of raising \$20,000. That money will be used in three ways:

To allow family of students to eat at the restaurant and check out what their family member has been up to.  
To open up Social OTR to people who may not otherwise eat there; those who may lack the means or think that they don't belong at a restaurant like that.

Proceeds from the Kickstarter campaign will be used to allow backers to sponsor a certain category or dinner for complementary meals. For instance, if a backer sponsors teachers, their donation will be used to comp the meal of a teacher who eats at the restaurant.

"The name Social OTR was super strategic," Findlay Market spokeswoman [Kelly Lanser](#) told me. "It's social with the training program – a collaboration with the [CityLink Center](#) and bringing people from the community into this amazing program – but also social from the communal tables down to the menu of shareable plates. It's all about being social and socially minded."

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