



Photo by: Courtesy

## Lilith cooks up a fresh start

Alex Geller  
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For many troubled youths in the Tel Aviv area, working at the restaurant is their last chance at a productive life.

When Lilith Restaurant first opened in 1993, founder Keren Kremmerman had no idea her culinary venture had the potential to rehabilitate the lives of adolescents with less-than-perfect backgrounds. Today, the chic restaurant sitting at 2 Dafna Street in Tel Aviv combines a therapeutic social program with professional training to restore troubled teens back into mainstream society. The restaurant started with intentions of serving a menu of gourmet, California-style dishes, but after re-opening in the spring of 2000, Lilith converted to more than just a kosher menu. Its more significant transformation was its cooperation with the ELEM organization. ELEM, established by a group of Israeli and American volunteers, has fostered a number of programs across the country to help youth-at-risk become integral, productive members of society. "We get all sorts of kids," said restaurant manager Assaf Blank, "from ELEM, social workers, and sometimes even patrol officers." Lilith employs teenagers between ages 14 and 18 in a number of culinary professions, including cooking, baking, waiting tables and bar tending. The majority of the youngsters, living in violent areas in and around Tel-Aviv, have dropped out of school and lead lives of drugs and violence. "For most kids, this is the last stop," confessed Blank. If not for the restaurant, many of the teenagers would already be in jail. The program consists of 18 months in the kitchen, working side by side with professional chefs while balancing routine check-ups with a social worker. Typically, the young adults start with preparation, and after about three months they are promoted to actually make the food. Currently, the restaurant employs 12 teens working under the direction of eight supervisory chefs. Not only is it a struggle for the youngsters to make it to work every day, but even more than that, to show up looking clean. "If I have to shave, then they have to shave," stated Blank. But the teens' troubles extend much further than just their appearance at the restaurant. Most have "never been in a situation where they have to do something day after day, but then again, no one has given them a chance like this." Alongside their daily culinary training, the teens are also required to meet with a social worker at least once a week. Their work in the kitchen is well tailored to suit each individual's needs. The social worker is extremely flexible, making himself constantly available by phone or personal meeting. The main character of the restaurant, however, is the chef. The apprentices spend more than 20 hours a week with the chefs. Omer Ben Gal, the head chef of the restaurant, is "one of the best social workers I've ever seen," says Blank, "the kids look up to him as something to be." Another cook, newest to the Lilith kitchen, has already won over the admiration of the teens and earned the name "Grandpa," well suited for his 45 years of kitchen experience. Anat, also a cook at Lilith, has worked in the restaurant for 15 years, and has the patience to "explain how to fill a glass of water a hundred times in a day." The training the teens receive at Lilith varies dramatically from an education they would ordinarily receive in school. The chefs, management and social workers meet every week to review the progress of each individual. If he or she is dealing with a lot at home, the youngster will receive more constructive assistance in what is usually a demanding kitchen. "There is one kid," recalls Ben Gal, "who couldn't take criticism, and the kitchen is all about criticism." Ben Gal gave only positive feedback for the first few months, but once he had developed a relationship with the boy, he began to really push him. "Before Lilith, the kid chased after his teachers with a knife," explained Ben Gal. Today, the same boy uses his knife only for the ingredients he slices. The difference is at Lilith, "it's real life. School is fake for the kids. It's not that you're teaching just how to make a salad. Here, they know someone will eat the salad they make." In fact, plenty of people enjoy meals at the elegantly dressed restaurant. Many large businesses choose to spend their money at Lilith because they receive an excellent meal while still contributing to a social cause. Lilith has stirred up so much success that it is able to support itself without any help from ELEM. The restaurant pays the boys and girls regularly in addition to its own bills, and hopefully in time, will be able to contribute its profits to ELEM. In doing so, Lilith

will facilitate a self-sufficient restaurant where youth in need will have the opportunity to reach out to other troubled teens. Unfortunately, not every story is that of success. Some drop out, unable to handle the sense of responsibility and discipline so foreign to them. "But you see one success and it cancels out 10 dropouts," proclaimed Blank. For the kids who do finish vigorous training, many find professional jobs in prominent restaurants around Tel Aviv. Others have the opportunity to enter the army, an option many would be unable to realize prior to their transformation. The greatest success, however, is the self-confidence and sense of belonging the kids discover along the way.

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