

Difference à la carte

In Europe, being disabled remains one of the main barriers to employment. Job offers made to disabled people are often limited to placements in specialised or charity-type institutions. In the past few years, the catering sector has gradually become more understanding of the idea of difference, hiring disabled staff to work front of house and in the kitchens. A recipe that works for staff, employers and customers too.

Louise Pluyaud
Journalist

All is quiet this morning in the restaurant En 10 Saveurs in Levallois-Perret, northern France. Marcus Légré is helping Marin Gerrier, an apprentice with Down's syndrome, to package biscuits baked on the premises. "Normally there are more of us, with a chef and two young kitchen hands, Noah and Maxime, who are autistic, and three other workers working front of house who are disabled too," says Marcus. In the 10 years he has worked in catering, it is the first time this manager finds himself in charge of a team of persons with disabilities. "Of course, you have to be more patient teaching them, but it's a first job for all these youngsters, and they are conscientious and keen." Until the Covid-19 crisis hit, the restaurant was never empty. To make things easier, customers came straight to the counter, and Marin served them from there. En 10 Saveurs has successfully adapted to the pandemic situation, offering individuals and businesses a "corporate social responsibility lunch box", containing a range of "home-made" products and artisanal and local foods, and this has been well received by customers.

Unemployment a major issue

"What I like in the restaurant business is the contact you have with the customers," beams Marin, before confiding that "the hardest thing is resisting the desserts because I do love my grub". Trainee waiter Marin is the son of Nathalie and Christophe Gerrier, the founders of En 10 Saveurs, which opened in March 2019. They had previously set up a first disability-inclusive business called Handirect 25 years ago, hiring people with disabilities to do clerical work. "We were aware that unemployment among disabled people is twice as high as in the population as a whole (18 per cent compared with 9 per cent¹)," explains Nathalie. In France, being disabled remains the prime reason for appeals to the Defender of Rights, whose job it is to counter discrimination. The employment rate for disabled people is still only just 3.9 per cent in the private sector, according to French Labour Ministry statistics for 2020, as against 2.7 per cent 10 years ago. In the public sector, it is 5.5 per cent. That figure remains below the compulsory quota of 6 per cent

of jobs (for businesses with a staff of more than 20), even though the quota has been a statutory requirement since 1987.

"When Marin came into our lives, it really made us re-think the challenges of disability, both professionally and personally," explains Nathalie Gerrier. The business pair realised that the jobs on offer through Handirect, requiring IT skills, were in reality far too technical and not necessarily suited to people with learning difficulties. So the couple decided to broaden the range of jobs available to disabled people and turned to the catering trade. To develop their new plan, they looked at a number of initiatives such as the Locanda dei Girasoli pizzeria, operating in Rome since 2000 with waiters who have Down's syndrome or autism. According to the pizzeria's boss Enzo Rimicci,

1. Source: Agefiph, report on *Les personnes handicapées et l'emploi* [Disabled people and employment], June 2019.

in an interview with the magazine *Nouvel Observateur*: "The whole thing was self-financed, without any help from the state." Back in France, the entrepreneurial couple launched themselves into the same adventure, using their own money. To recruit, they approached the association Grandir à l'École et en Société. "Wanting to do it was what drove us," Nathalie insists. "There's no such thing as perfection. We adjusted, looking to understand the person in front of us," she adds.

Breaking down prejudice

For an exchange of good practice, Nathalie and Christophe are also able to draw on "Les Brigades Extraordinaires", a group that the restaurant En 10 Saveurs is a member of. "It's a group of disability-inclusive restaurants — eight in France and one in Belgium — which mostly employ staff with learning difficulties," explains Flore Lelièvre, an interior designer by training. Her restaurant Le Reflet, which opened in Nantes in 2016, was the first in France to take on people with Down's syndrome. "I wanted to create a place which would provide not only jobs but an interface between people with Down's and the rest of society," she adds. Special arrangements were needed, of course: colour-coded markers on the tables to help the staff, easy-grip plates, a rest room and appropriate work hours (20 hours a week on average). Adapting the premises and equipment cost 400 000 euros, which were raised from investors and donors.

Antoine Beslot has been a waiter at the Le Reflet restaurant, on the permanent payroll, from the very beginning. Popular with customers for his jokey manner, what he likes best about this job is "working somewhere normal", as he puts it, smiling. Antoine previously had sheltered employment in an ESAT (a support centre helping disabled people into work).

"All our staff have become more independent. Nowadays, they take the bus or tram on their own. Not only have they developed their skills, but their self-confidence has grown too," says Flore Lelièvre, with evident delight. The restaurant is rated fifth in Nantes on TripAdvisor, and two of its patrons, Marie and Katie Bouësse, come not just "because it's good, but to support a venture that makes sense". Its success has not only inspired other disability-inclusive restaurants like Café Joyeux in Rennes, which subsequently opened branches in Paris too, but also convinced other restaurateurs to embrace difference. Christophe

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Bourrissoux, manager of the Résinier au Barp (Gironde), is one of those restaurateurs who took the plunge and hired a young man with Down's syndrome, Yvan, as a waiter. "Our job is a tough one, very much so, and the language is sometimes a bit strong. Since Yvan has been with us we've all toned it down a bit, cleaned up our act, and we try much harder to be nice."² To help him integrate into the team, Yvan has a mentor, Anne Heynderycx, a specialist educator from the Down's syndrome association Trisomie 21 Aquitaine. She welcomes Yvan's inclusion, but regrets that it is "difficult to find more partners willing to make the same leap of faith".

Productive and worthwhile

Rachel Bouvard heads the corporate social responsibility department at GNI-SYN-HORCAT (the national group of independent restaurateurs and national caterers' union). She concedes that some of its 13 000 members think "disability is not compatible with their physically very demanding work". However, 80 per cent of disabilities are not visible. Edouard de Broglie, President of the Ethik Investment Group, points out that "people often think of a disabled person as someone in a wheelchair or carrying a white stick." But he insists: "Even then, disability doesn't mean under-performance. Far from it." De Broglie is also founder of the Dans le Noir? restaurant chain: the idea is that you dine in total darkness, assisted and waited on by blind people. "We don't make a point of the fact that we employ blind people," he says. "Most of our customers come for an out-of-the-ordinary sensory experience — gastro-nomic — which turns into a human experience too as they realise for themselves what it means to be different." "Outside," says Mohand Touat, a visually impaired waiter, "I need you to help me across the street, but here in the restaurant it's you who needs

me. It's not about making people realise how it feels to be blind, that would be silly and it's not at all the aim here."

Dans le Noir? isn't a charitable group but a commercial operation. "We run at a 12 per cent profit, top of the range for restaurants," says De Broglie. Back in the day, banks wouldn't lend him money for his start-up. "I was told there was no basic economic model. So I created it myself using my own money," he recalls. His first Dans le Noir? restaurant was in Paris in 2004, and there are now branches in nine cities in France and abroad (including in London, Madrid, Barcelona and St Petersburg). The teams in Nice and Casablanca were trained by Mohand Touat. This restaurant gave him his first job at the age of 42. "My Cap Emploi counsellor told me about it. I wasn't particularly interested in catering, but I had nothing else. My training as a switchboard operator and in IT never brought me any work," the waiter explains. He applied and went for a first trial.

"What we look for when recruiting are certain skills: an easy manner, which is more important than technical knowledge or perfect mobility," says Camille Leveillé, the Dans le Noir? head of development for France. Mohand Touat is now on the permanent payroll, earning the minimum wage. "I wake up in the morning with a purpose, workmates, a social life and job security," he says. Previously, he got by on allowances from the MDPH, the departmental support centre for disabled people which recognises you as having a disability. But, according to Mohand, "In order to get financial help, you constantly had to be filling in forms. If there's one document missing from your file, you're at the mercy of the administration. It's not as easy as people might think." Sophie Cluzel, State Secretary to the Prime Minister with responsibility for people with disabilities, explained in a 2020 interview³

2. Excerpt from *Restaurants extraordinaires: Travailler avec un handicap mental, c'est possible!* [Unusual restaurants: learning difficulties don't mean you can't work!] published by the Association Trinôme 44, Presse de l'EHESP, 2019.

3. "*Quand les enjeux du handicap avancent c'est toute la société qui progresse*" [Progress on disability issues means progress for the whole of society], interview in *Le Un*, December 2020.

that to obtain the AAH (the adult disability allowance) of 902.70 euros a month maximum, "people had to provide a certificate every three years confirming their status: 'I still have Down's syndrome, am blind, am a double amputee.' As of January 2019, we have got rid of that bit of red tape."

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Training is vital

"Research shows that disabled people integrate into the world of work more easily when they have received 'sandwich course' training," says Stéphane Marion, co-chair of the CSR committee on disability of the Syndicat des Indépendants, an employers' association. Flore Lelièvre recently opened a new restaurant in Paris with a team of Down's youngsters who were already trained: "The difference in practice between them and the Nantes team, who had no experience, was plain to see!" Le Reflet is a partner of the Paris catering school. Since 2016, the school has had a bridging class which trains 15 students a year between the ages of 16 and 26.

But training does not necessarily guarantee you a job. Véronique Deslandes reports, "One youngster gave up on the restaurant sector because, despite being keen, he couldn't find a job. He's now working as a security guard. Another student was experiencing problems in her personal life and reacted disproportionately to her employer. She got fired." So, to guarantee secure career paths, there must be a line of continuity. "This is starting to happen, but it has to continue right up to the level of employers" — which could call for mentored apprenticeships. In this way, explains Franck Gallée, regional head of LADAPT (the association for the social and professional integration of disabled people), "the apprentice can do his training in optimal conditions, thanks to an employment counsellor who acts as a link between him, the training centre and the employer". However, as Rachel Bouvard of GNI-SYNHORCAT comments, "Employers don't yet avail themselves of this mechanism automatically, and not all of them know about it."

Doing things better

In 2019, according to the latest GNI figures, the rate of direct employment for disabled people in the catering sector (hotels, cafés and restaurants) was 3.29 per cent. "That is more than in 2000 when it was 2.9 per cent," says Rachel Bouvard. "But we can do better." The GNI's disabilities committee has plans for a brochure listing support entities and subsidies, to be sent to employers. "Because the will to act is there," says Stéphane Marion. As manager of a restaurant in Nantes which employs two disabled staff, he nevertheless deplores the red tape surrounding subsidies. "We often have our noses to the grindstone," he says. "We mustn't break the employment laws, but we do need to make the administrative burden lighter and simpler."

In Bouvard's opinion, "Priority must also be given to making future managers aware of the need to include disabled staff in their future teams." In this way, inclusion becomes a matter of course. Especially as, says Edouard de Broglie, disabled people are "a solution to the fast turnover of labour in restaurants". De Broglie is an employer with a team of staff who are loyal because their needs are always listened

to — as is Arthur Devillers. This 30-year-old deaf entrepreneur has, since 2018, been boss of a vegan fast food outlet which employs four staff, all with the same disability. Located in the heart of Paris, Furahaa (which means joy in Swahili) seeks to familiarise its customers with sign language. "To order at the counter, customers can point at the board where there are pictures of the dishes on offer", the young man explains. "A hand-held buzzer alerts them when their meal is ready. People get used to it easily. When things aren't clear, I communicate by writing on a notepad. Sometimes I mime." He has plans for franchises throughout France and hopes to inspire other disabled people to open their own restaurants, despite the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on a sector under severe pressure.

"We realise that taking on disabled people won't be a priority for restaurant owners who are already struggling to survive," concedes Hugues Defoy of Agefiph, an organisation which manages funding for the integration of disabled people. "We shall do all we can to make sure that the most vulnerable people aren't the first to suffer, and that all the work of the past few years doesn't grind to a halt." ●

↴ A waitress at the restaurant Le Reflet de Nantes. Photo: © Belga

