

Homeless enjoy a generous serve of festive cheer

GABRIELLA COSLOVICH

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AMID the steel and glass slickness of Docklands, a Christmas brunch with a difference was about to begin. As red and green Christmas banners flapped furiously in the southerlies belting up New Quay Promenade, a motley bunch gathered expectantly outside a rest-aurant with million-dollar views.

They'd been ferried here in minivans to this exclusive patch of Melbourne, far from the reality of their lives. For some, it was their first visit to Docklands. All had come to experience something they'd never be able to afford - a three-course dinner prepared by a head chef and graciously served by professional waiters.

For the fifth successive year, the staff of Docklands' Mecca Bah restaurant served Christmas brunch to Melbourne's most marginalised - the poor and the homeless, those with addictions and mental illnesses, and those who had fallen on hard times, and all of them frequent users of the Salvation Army's services for whom Christmas could easily turn out to be the loneliest day of the year. Their gratitude that it had not was palpable.

"To be invited down to the Docklands to one of the most well-known restaurants and to be treated as though you are almost more welcome than the paying customers, that's beyond charity and tax write-offs, that's people who give a shit, and that starts making you feel worthwhile," said Paul Smith, a rooming house resident who was spending his first Christmas without his kids.

Mecca Bah chef Justin Cortellino had started preparing the Christmas brunch on Thursday, and on Christmas morning he was back in the kitchen at 8am. Using food donated by his suppliers, Cortellino fed 130 people, his staff delivering them platters of sizzling hot sausages, roasted chicken and beef, roasted vegetables, salads, and desert of chocolate cake and panettone with cream.

When Cortellino prepared his first Salvation Army brunch at Mecca Bah three years ago ,it opened his eyes to a hidden side of Melbourne.

"I was taken aback when I saw it, especially the kids who come in," he said. "You read about poverty in other countries, but when you see it on your own door step, it's different altogether."

Each year in late November, the Salvation Army's commanding officer Brendan Nottle notices the vibe at the Salvos' Bourke Street centre start to change. As the Christmas tinsel and trees go up and retailers start driving home their message to splurge, those on society's fringes begin to feel invisible.

"Christmas Day can be a really sad day for people here and often through the media they are reminded of all that they don't have. There's a lot of focus on families, there's a lot of focus on giving, and they don't have either, and it reinforces that they're different," Mr Nottle said. Mecca Bah's annual Christmas brunch helped to restore their sense of dignity and self-worth, he added.

In nearby North Melbourne, in the far more humble surrounds of the Ozanam Community Centre, another 200 people in need were served Christmas lunch by volunteers from St Vincent de Paul. There were no exclusive water views here, but the opportunity for a decent meal in the company of others was no less appreciated.

"If they didn't have this do here today, I don't know what I would have done. I was in tears earlier, and since I have got here it's lifted my spirit a bit, just seeing that I'm not the only one that's got problems," said Joanne Gerrard, who recently became homeless.

"I think it's great and I take my hat off to these volunteers who on Christmas Day take time out from their own families and Christmas lunches for us. It's beautiful."

Robert Rushmer experienced his first Christmas lunch at the centre and found it "the greatest day of living just to be able to come here".

In these two distinctly different places - Mecca Bah and Ozanam Community Centre - among the truest expressions of Christmas were shown: genuine giving and thanksgiving.