

Hotel Etico Blue Mountains

By Carolyn Frichot

Nestled in a popular tourist nook in the majestic Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, is a splendid hotel, poised to potentially transform the lives of people with Down syndrome. Hotel Etico will be a conventional hotel but it will be staffed mainly by people with intellectual disability. It will provide a safe and supportive environment in which to train people with intellectual disability and help them develop into independent adults, ready for open employment.

Based on Project Etico, the successful Italian social enterprise model, Hotel Etico Blue Mountains will be the first Australian venue to open and operate, later in 2019.

Beginning in 2009, Albergo Etico started as a hotel in the Asti region of Italy providing supported work experience for people with an intellectual disability to help them improve their skills, increase their employment opportunities and break down barriers between people with disability and the general community. The hotel became financially sustainable within two years and subsequently expanded with other hotels opening in Rome, Buenos Aires and Bratislava.

The aim of Project Etico Australia is to base the hotel in the Blue Mountains where there is a strong tourist industry and easy access to a Registration Training Organisation (TAFE). Down Syndrome NSW is partnering with Project Etico Australia to explore opportunities for collaboration to promote employment opportunities for people with Down syndrome, as well as support development of independence and social connection.

'Employment is identified as a major life goal for our adult members with Down syndrome. However there remains huge barriers to meaningful and sustainable participation in the workforce', according to Down Syndrome NSW CEO Dr Kathy Chapman.

'We are always looking for innovative ways to connect our members with open training and employment opportunities. Project Etico suits our goals in that area.'

How it works

Etico is a social enterprise that aims to train people with intellectual disabilities, who would traditionally be excluded from the workforce, into independent and skilled professionals of the hospitality sector.

The project provides an integrated approach to training, employment and independent living. The hotels are staffed by people with intellectual disabilities supported by hospitality professionals to provide a high standard of accommodation and catering services for locals and domestic and international tourists.

Training

During their period of training, trainees are rotated through all areas of hotel work: reception, administration, room service, table service, kitchen work and cheffing. At any stage, the trainee can decide to specialise in an area of their own choice.

The training involves:

- enrolment in TAFE Certificate II or III in Hospitality,
- rotation through the period of training to cover all areas of hotel work,
- part-time training and work, with the length of training and number of hours per week varying depending on the person's skills, abilities and training goals,
- a minimum of six months to a maximum of four years.

Trainees may also be given the opportunity to live at the hotel during training to learn how to live and work independently. They will learn skills like taking care of





● Albergo Etico, Italy

their room, doing their laundry, being on time and well groomed for work, managing money and tackling life's daily challenges.

Through a combination of mentoring and peer support, each person builds their capacity for independent living. The vision is to create a holistic solution to overcoming barriers, allowing people with intellectual disability to not only gain and maintain meaningful employment in the general community but also to learn how to live independently.

The success of Project Etico is largely due to positive attitudes and relationships formed with hospitality and tourism industries, as well as key stakeholder organisations that embody and promote the concept.

Down Syndrome NSW is partnering with Project Etico to provide assistance in identifying and recruiting interested members to work at the hotel. They will also provide ongoing advice and training to hotel staff, Disability Employment Services and case managers on how to best support a person with Down syndrome in the workplace.

A great deal of membership support has already been received through an Expression of Interest campaign last April. Down Syndrome NSW will continue to support the program by promotion through membership and the wider community and ongoing training for case managers and support workers.

Carolyn Frichot is the Communications Manager for Down Syndrome NSW.

First-hand experience of how Project Etico works.

Project Etico has resonated on such a scale that it has become the subject of an Australian documentary film due to premier at the Melbourne Film Festival 2020.

My Big Fat Italian Kitchen by Black Sheep Films Australia, is a compelling documentary is set in the ancient Italian town of Asti, where the Slow Food movement was born. You are taken on a journey that transforms the lives of young adults with Down syndrome or intellectual disability by providing a model for social change.

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Antonio De Benedetto is an Italian chef on a quest to change the world with food. His apprentices in the kitchen are Mirko Piras, a young man born with Down syndrome, who dreams of becoming a great chef 'just like Antonio' and Jessica Berta who wants to be a pâtissière.
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Go to the Voice website for digital versions of this article and to see the trailer for the documentary.

<https://downsyndromevoice.org.au/>

You can support the production of this documentary at this link: <https://www.documentaryaustralia.com.au/films/4344/my-big-fat-italian-kitchen>

