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Breaking Barriers Through Food: Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office Hosts First-Ever "Incarcerated Dinner" Featuring Charlotte Foodies, Residents

(Charlotte, N.C.) – In a bold and heartfelt effort to dismantle stigma and humanize those incarcerated, the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) recently hosted an "Incarcerated Dinner" inside the Detention Center, the first of its kind in the county's history.

On Thursday, July 24, more than 30 members of Charlotte Foodies, a popular local food enthusiast group, sat down for an unforgettable dinner experience with several residents of the Mecklenburg County Detention Center. What made the evening extraordinary and intentionally unspoken was that the foodies didn't know they were dining with individuals currently incarcerated. Each resident wore a Charlotte Foodie shirt, blending in seamlessly to create a shared space without bias or judgment.

The goal of the "Incarcerated Dinner" was to break the cycle of stigma, spark real conversation, and reframe what it means to be incarcerated.

The dinner, a vision brought to life by Sheriff Garry McFadden and Programs Director Dorian Johnson, featured a five-course luxury meal curated and prepared by Chef Erick Crawford, a formerly incarcerated culinary artist who understands the power of food and second chances. His inspired menu included:

- Shrimp and pimento grits with beef sausage crumble and salsa verde
- Pickled deviled eggs with crispy turkey bacon and crushed Flamin' Hot Cheetos
- Hibachi ramen stir-fry
- Smoked prime rib brushed with pineapple soy glaze served with mashed sweet potatoes
- State-cake with honeybun layers and tang citrus cream

"This wasn't just a meal. It was a movement," said Dorian Johnson, MCSO Programs Director. "The idea was to create an experience where the person comes before the perception. By removing

labels and sharing a table, we saw genuine connection, curiosity, and compassion. This is what rehabilitation begins to look like.”

Throughout the evening, foodies and residents shared open conversations, laughter, and reflections, all within the walls of a space typically associated with confinement and separation. For one night, those walls became a place of restoration and of course, a place to fully enjoy an array of diverse foods.

Chef Erick, who now runs his own culinary business in Davidson, N.C., described the evening as proof that hope belongs everywhere.

“As someone in recovery, this experience hit home. Too often, people who’ve made mistakes are written off, but this dinner challenged that narrative,” Chef Erick said. “I went from recovery to owning an award-winning food truck, and now a brick-and-mortar restaurant and catering business. There is a path forward, one built on hard work, faith, and community. The reactions on people’s faces said it all: joy, connection, dignity. That’s what this dinner delivered.”

Sheriff McFadden, who has championed progressive programming and culture change within the facility, made the rounds, talking with each of the guests.

“We are committed to reducing recidivism by changing how we treat people inside these walls,” Sheriff McFadden said. “This dinner represents what’s possible when we lead with vision, not fear. I want Mecklenburg County to be a model for how detention centers can become places of healing, learning, and transformation. We’re not just housing people; we’re preparing them to return to the community stronger than when they arrived.”

Plans are already underway to host more dinners and other experiential events designed to reshape public perception and give residents the dignity they deserve on their path forward.

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