

# Love, death and food in Greenwich



**Bill Fallon** | Aug-06-10, 12:53 PM |

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When Versailles restaurant opens at 339 Greenwich Ave. next month, Versailles at 315 Greenwich Ave. will close.

The continuity is not lost on Ingrid McMenamin, owner of the bistro-patisserie and bakery. It's something of the point, realized every time a grandparent treats a grandchild to an éclair as good as the one the grandparent knew as a child.

"A lot of restaurateurs come in with a concept and they have an infusion of who they are," McMenamin said. "Versailles speaks for itself and we're just making it that much better."

The new site includes an additional 800 square feet with an 11.5-foot ceiling.

Added amenities will include a coffee bar, a bigger wine bar, more seating and dinners, an addition to the breakfasts and lunches currently served.

"So often you see a local store close and a big store moves in and then the big store moves out and what's lost is the sense of community," McMenamin said. "Not with Versailles."

When she spoke, the dichotomy of her plans could not have been starker: a pleasant crowd savoring coffee and pastries at 315 and a dustier construction crowd savoring the wallboard at 339.

For Ingrid and her husband, Steve McMenamin, the new restaurant defines "labor of love" even as its storyline dips mightily into tragedy.

On their first date in 1992, the couple that would become the McMenamins ordered the Pont-Neuf cake to go. Versailles still makes the caramelized, arched confection named for a Paris bridge.

The McMenamins dined at Versailles across the years – “a unique, community, feel-at-home atmosphere,” according to Ingrid – until Dec. 12, 2008, when Steve alone went in for breakfast.

He learned from then (and current) manager Rasa Lavigne – “a dear friend” – that the day before, owner Maurice Clos-Versailles had been killed in a gas cylinder accident in Albemarle County, Va. Fire investigators cited a vapor explosion and fire inside his full-size vehicle caused by pressurized gas cylinders and ruled it accidental. “And my husband said, ‘Rasa, don’t worry. Versailles is not going anywhere.’”

“At that time, we knew what was going on on Greenwich Avenue – the storefronts being taken over by big chains,” she said. “An eatery is important to a community, and more so Versailles because it’s been part of the community almost 30 years. Children have grown up here. Four generations of a single family come here for Sunday brunch.”

Versailles has become an informal meeting place among Greenwich businesspeople, notable beyond the food, according to general manager and executive chef Jean-Pierre Bagnato, for its ambience: quiet and private.

“For the next restaurant, I would like to take this to the next level,” said Bagnato, whose “Bonjour, mademoiselle,” as a patron exits adds an exclamation point to the bistro flavor. “The privacy of the old restaurant, if a company requires that, they can rent out the whole restaurant.” Already, he has a taker: an unnamed bank that will take over the new restaurant for a meeting in September.

Versailles does all of its own baking and supplies the cakes for numerous country clubs. Baking is done at Versailles’ off-site, fully rigged professional kitchen where, among a battalion of mixers, a low-slung belted affair stands ready to produce croissants.

Also new for the expanding bistro is its delivery van, fully refrigerated, which is critical. “We never want to break the chain of cold,” Bagnato said of transporting Versailles’ food. The license plate reads: PASTRY.



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Steve McMenamin makes this comment

Tuesday, 10 August 2010

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Bill, you're a very good writer. We know the story because we lived it, but you've memorialized it most elegantly. Thank you.

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