



Maren McGowan decorates the new Goldendale restaurant with changing displays of her photographs.

Where Fare and Photos Meet

Glass Onion Diners Enjoy Varied Menu And Pictures On Display

By Jeanie Senior

The Glass Onion Restaurant & Gallery is a showcase for the talents of photographer Maren McGowan and chef Matt McGowan, who say they moved to Goldendale because it reminds them of the small towns where they grew up: Matt in Iowa, Maren in Pennsylvania.

The Glass Onion is in a century-old house on South Columbus Avenue that they bought in late 2006, remodeled, restored and opened for business in December 2007.

A changing exhibit of Maren's photographs hang on the walls of the dining rooms. The restaurant's name comes from a song on the Beatles' "White Album."

The McGowans and their son, Arlo, lived upstairs while they worked on the house. Built in 1902, "it was old and tired and needed a lot of work," Maren says.

"It was kind of a project, even hiring contractors," adds Matt. But their first year in business has been good.

"We're pleasantly surprised that we've been received so well," says Maren.

Their account of what went into the restaurant makes it clear that a lot of hard work and determination preceded its opening.

After they moved to the Columbia Gorge from Sacramento, California, six years ago, both worked in restaurants in Hood River. Matt eventually got a job as chef at the Lyle Hotel, where he stayed for 2½ years, until the business was purchased by another chef.

"When he lost the job, we were kind of forced into making some decisions," Maren says.

They started a catering business, a field where they both had experience. They catered weddings, private parties and large events.

"We had tossed around the idea of opening a restaurant, but it wasn't something we were really seriously thinking about until we started doing catering," she says. "When we bought the house where the restaurant is, we had a restaurant in mind. We just hadn't planned on doing it so quickly. Then we just said, 'Let's do it.' We just kind of jumped into it."

That jump was fueled by 20-plus years of experience in the restaurant industry for Matt, who started working in restaurants as a teenager, and after college graduated from a culinary school in Sacramento, and Maren, who also held restaurant jobs while she was in school.

"It's like it's something in your blood," she says. "It gets into your system. It's something we know."

Still, she confesses the past few years since their move to the Gorge

have passed in a blur.

Maren continued her photography business—after they first moved north from California, she was flying back to the Sacramento area to photograph weddings—and she also sold real estate and worked as an insurance agent in Goldendale.

Other events included the birth of Arlo—almost 5 years ago, and daughter, Elsa, born two weeks after they opened the Glass Onion.

The McGowans met in Sacramento, where Matt worked as a restaurant chef and Maren was doing photography, plus “front of the house” restaurant work.

“We decided we didn’t want to live in Sacramento anymore,” she says. “We wanted to head north to the Pacific Northwest.”

They looked at Portland and Hood River. Goldendale piqued their interest, partly because of the more reasonable housing prices.

“We saw cool old Victorian homes for sale there,” Maren says.

When they headed back to Sacramento, Maren told Matt “we can go home and keep paying our \$1,000 a month rent and grinding away in Sacramento, or we can put our notices in and leave, and do whatever we have to do to survive.

“Our friends thought we were nuts because we had no jobs.”

But they both were employed soon after moving. Matt worked in two different Hood River



Above, Matt McGowan has extensive restaurant experience. Below, from left, son Arlo, Maren, daughter Elsa and Matt.

restaurants, and Maren in another. Matt even trained as a school bus driver because they feared one of the restaurants where he worked was about to close. It eventually did shut its doors, but he didn’t have to use his bus driver’s skills, because he got the chef’s job at the Lyle Hotel.

Now that he has his own kitchen, Matt cooks what he calls “simple food executed at a high level.”

“The longer I cook, the more rustic the things are,” he explains. “More rustic, but not simple. I’m getting away from stuff that’s really technical, from wanting to cook with all the expensive ingredients—white truffles, duck liver. That kind of wears off. Not everybody wants to eat that. I want to appeal to a broader audience. A lot of technical cooking is pretty arrogant.

“We’re trying to cook for who’s here. We know where we are. We offer pretty upscale meat-and-potatoes.”

He grins and adds: “Maren hates it when I say that.”

The restaurant features fresh ingredients, organic and local products, specialty breads and pastas, local wines and craft beer, as well as free Wi-Fi. The menu includes salads and sandwiches, local Angus beef steaks and burgers, a house-cured pork chop, seared sea scallops, grilled ahi tuna and ziti with classic Bolognese meat sauce.

The Glass Onion, whose clientele includes people from all through the Gorge as well as travelers from the Tri-Cities, Portland, Vancouver, Bend and Seattle, is offering wine dinners and other special events, as well as business parties.

With the economy headed into treacherous waters, Maren says they are aware that new restaurants struggle to stay afloat.

A lot of new restaurateurs don’t have any previous experience and throw a lot of money into the business, says Maren.

“But (they) don’t have a comprehension of what it takes, day to day, to run a restaurant,” she says. “If you don’t have experience, you have to hire everyone.

“We’re basically scraping by, just like anybody else who’s got a new business. We feel like, if we get really desperate, we’ll just work more. He’ll be alone in the kitchen, I’ll be alone out front.”

Even now, she says, “We’re basically always here.” ■

The Glass Onion Restaurant & Gallery is open Wednesdays, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. The current menu is posted on the Web site at www.theglassonionrestaurant.com

Correction

Van Kellem’s name was misspelled in a story and in photo captions published in the December Klickitat PUD edition of Ruralite magazine.

