

Loves is a many splendoured thing

Sep 3 2009 By Richard McComb

BIRMINGHAM'S bustling restaurant scene is about to get a whole lotta Love – thanks to one of the country's most talented chefs.

Steve Love and his wife Claire are in the final days' preparation for the launch of their waterfront city eatery, Loves. Future customers have been popping in throughout the week for a glass of bubbly before the restaurant, in Canal Square, off Sheepcote Street, opens for business next Tuesday.

Inspired by classic French cuisine, Loves will offer an informal, fine dining experience in the heart of one of the city's trendy canalside apartment developments. It's a peaceful spot but Broad Street is only a two-minute stroll away.

Loves will cater for 32 covers and have a private dining room for eight. There will also be covered seating outside where people can share a bottle of wine and some relaxed dining.

Claire, the general manager, says: "We are calling our service informal but professional. We are not clothing the tables as we have done before. We want people to judge us on our food.

"You walk past a restaurant with cloths on the tables and rightly or wrongly you make a judgment.

"The people here [living nearby] are in their 20s and 30s. They are professional people and they have a high disposable income. But most of them would not eat here if they saw cloths because they would think it is posh."

The pricing of menus is yet to be finalised but the three-course lunch is likely to be £19.50. The menu will also be available early evening, before 7pm, for £25, for the pre-show crowd. The three-course a la carte will about £38 for lunch and dinner. There will also be a tasting menu with the option of accompanying wines.

Chatting inside the restaurant – it's more of a building site when we meet – Steve shows me some computer images of his dishes and they look fantastic. There is a duck in two parts – the breast and winglet served first, followed by a braised leg. Venison comes with a coffee brittle, smoked potato mash, sprout puree, sloe gin jelly and spiced apple. And there's a ravishing array of rabbit, including a tongue-twisting Welsh rarebit rabbit.

The wine list is a "work in progress," says Claire, who is finishing a wine diploma and planning to do a masters in vino. She promises "something different" with the list but is keeping her cards close.

She and Steve made their professional name at Loves in Leamington before running the College Arms at Lower Quinton, near Stratford-upon-Avon. For the past two years, Steve has been head chef at Cotswold House Hotel in Chipping Campden. He is a copiously talented chef – as a former Roux Scholar he worked under Alain Ducasse in Paris – and always hankered after a return to managing his own place with Claire.

The couple looked at the former site of La Toque d'Or, Didier Philipot's old haunt in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, but felt it wasn't right for them. Then they were tipped off about a vacant ground-floor unit at Canal Square, which is approach from Sheepcote Street via white footbridge.

"As soon as we walked over the bridge and saw the place we knew it was right," says 40-year-old Steve.

"There is a nice feel here," adds Claire, who is 32. "You come over the bridge and you are in your own little square. It doesn't feel like you are in the city centre – but you are so near to Broad Street."

The couple first viewed the site in May and completed the deal in June. It has been a hectic summer preparing for the opening. "We are still chasing ourselves," says Claire.

The couple initially moved from Loves at Leamington to the College Arms – which had accommodation as well as a bar – but if anything the place was too big for them and they realised they were happiest concentrating on a restaurant. Their stint at the College Arms ended after fire swept through the property in 2007. Claire recalls carrying their baby daughter, Lilly-Rose, to safety and the brush with disaster had a traumatic effect on the couple. Steve says: "The fire demoralised us."

Although Steve returned to the role of employee chef at Cotswold House, he and Claire always wanted to return to the fray, running their own place. Claire says: "We are restaurateurs and it is what we do well." Steve believes Birmingham's rising culinary reputation – Brum has three Michelin-star restaurants – is a huge bonus for a newcomer to the city. He says: "It is a massive benefit to have the food culture that there is in Birmingham now. The city centre is a lot more cosmopolitan than it was."

For now, he is content to build up a solid following. "We are not chasing accolades. The main aim is to fill the restaurant," says Steve.

And what of an elusive Michelin star? "If it comes, it comes," he adds. "It is not something I have ever had. It is phenomenal for the people who have got it and I am pleased for them. It is brilliant for their businesses."

It's a busy time for Steve who is also competing in one of the country's most prestigious cooking institutions. Steve is a finalist in the Master of Culinary Arts (MCA), which is held every four years. (Brad Gent, restaurant manager at Opus restaurant, Birmingham, is among the restaurant management and service finalists.) Steve will have to cook a four-course meal to the most exacting standards, including a lobster mousse and a Souffle Harlequin (half chocolate, half vanilla), on September 23.

Due to the restaurant opening, he hasn't had time to practise the dishes. No pressure, then. "I am more stressed about the MCA than anything," says Steve.

* Loves restaurant, The Glasshouse, Canal Square, Browning Street, Birmingham B16 8FL. Call 0121 454 5151 or go to www.loves-restaurant.co.uk