

September 14, 2007 *Southbridge Evening News*

Pub evokes Irish charm

Dark Horse Tavern opens in Southbridge

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SOUTHBRIDGE — "This is just what Southbridge needed," said Karen Rawson, as she sipped a glass of wine at the Dark Horse Tavern, which opened for business earlier this week.

"I was just talking to the person next to me," said Rawson, a Sturbridge resident and mother of a Dark Horse bartender. "We were just saying how beautiful downtown Southbridge is, and how things like this can bring it back."

A companion, Tim LeBlanc of East Brookfield, said he was impressed by the pub's atmosphere and décor, which exudes old-world Irish charm.

"Everything here is new and really clean," LeBlanc said.



Chef Bill Walmsley.
(click for larger version)

The Dark Horse Tavern inhabits space on the lower level of the renovated industrial building at 12 Crane Street.

Once complete, the Crane Street complex — designed by local developer Gabriel McCarthy — will house, along with the tavern, an art gallery, an upscale restaurant, an entertainment hall, a cigar shop, a brewery and a bakery, as well as offices and apartments.

The art gallery, Sevengaits Studios, has been up and running for more than a month.

The 12 Crane St. complex stands along the banks of the Quinebaug River, just across the street from the Flatiron building, another old industrial structure given a new lease on life by McCarthy's development firm.

For Bill Walmsley, the owner and head chef at the Dark Horse Tavern, the first week of business at the tavern has been an exciting but hectic period of adjustment and fine-tuning.

"It's like being a new parent for the first time," Walmsley said, as he prepared an order of "chicken pasties" — grilled chicken breast topped with assorted vegetables and wrapped in a pastry crust.

"There's a learning curve," he said. "You're on your own. You're not doing somebody else's gig."

Walmsley, an avid cyclist, used to work as an insurance salesman before learning to cook professionally as an assistant chef at the nearby Vienna Restaurant. The Dark Horse Tavern represents his first shot at a solo act in the kitchen.

He described the feelings of anticipation before the tavern opened as akin to "waiting for a newborn child."

"It's an exciting time for all of us," Walmsley said. "We're happy to be here."

Originally, the Dark Horse Tavern was slated for an early August opening date, but the town slowed things down by mandating that the kitchen be in working condition before awarding a liquor license.

"That was our little hiccup we had to deal with," Walmsley said.

He said he harbors no ill will toward the town for insisting on certain standards before issuing the liquor license.

"Everybody was doing their job," Walmsley said.

At the moment, the Dark Horse Tavern offers only a portion of the traditional Irish favorites and standard pub fare its menu will eventually boast.

Walmsley said his goal is to expand the menu to its full capacity before unveiling the tavern's upscale neighbor, the Hop Vine Café.

Located directly upstairs from the tavern, the café aims to simulate the atmosphere of an outdoor courtyard in Europe. The kitchen, bar and restroom area are all designed to appear as quaint buildings lining the courtyard.

Walmsley said he anticipates being able to open the Hop Vine Café by late September or early October.

Rawson, already enamored of the Dark Horse Tavern, said she and her husband would be among the first guests to sample the new café.

"When that restaurant opens up, this whole place is really going to be jumping," Rawson said. "This is just what Southbridge needed."

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