

BRASSERIE SETS DIFFERENT TONE AT ALLEN PLAZA

By ANYA MARTIN

One could say it started as a matter of taste.

"My wife and I had been going to Brasserie Le Coze for several years and really developed a fondness for the food," said Hal Barry, chairman of Barry Real Estate Companies Inc. "To sit at the bar and have a big bowl of mussels and a glass of cold white French burgundy wine is about as good as it gets."

Barry needed a top-class anchor restaurant to set the right tone for Ivan Allen Plaza, a \$500 million, nine-block, mixed-use development, and Brasserie Le Coze owner Fabrice Vergez needed a new location after Neiman Marcus expanded into his Lenox Square space.

When Vergez's new French-American Brasserie opens in 30 Allen Plaza in late March, it will be one of the first major downtown debuts by a well-known Atlanta restaurateur in years.

While many restaurateurs fear "downtown syndrome," referring to undelivered promises made before and after the 1996 Olympics, Vergez said Barry convinced him that the time was now thanks to all the new office, condominium, hotel and mixed-use projects either recently opened or under way.

"People are walking from Midtown to downtown already," Vergez said. "The only thing we need is more retail at street level, and we'll have a metropolitan area."

The name "French American Brasserie" refers to the roughly 400-seat restaurant's mix of French and American cuisine and plays on his first name, he said. "But if people want to call it 'FAB,' so be it," Vergez said.

The menu will include the same reasonably priced French specialties Vergez served at Brasserie Le Coze, as well as a raw bar with oysters, crab and lobster.

The American element is found in a variety of steaks to please the American businessmen likely to lunch and dine downtown, seasoned with traditional French sauces such as Bearnaise and black truffle Madeira.

All dishes will be available at both lunch and dinner, with lighter fare of sandwiches, salads and quiche added at lunch, Vergez said.



Fabrice Vergez, the owner of the now-closed Brasserie Le Coze, says development helped him get over his initial reluctance to opening downtown.

Aesthetically, the interior will resemble a grand brasserie like one might find in a 19th-century French train station.

This traditional approach was a welcome challenge for Atlanta-based Restaurants Consulting Group Inc., best known for the look of such trendsetting eateries as Taurus, Eclipse di Luna and MF Sushibar, said Tony Akly, the design firm's president and owner.

This time he worked with mosaic marble floors, crystal chandeliers, brass accents, red draperies, a dynamic stained-wood round bar and an entrance resembling a Paris Metro station with fanned angled glass and ironwork, he said.

"We're trying to bring out the old-country feel you find on the streets of Paris, a comfortable feel but with the amenities of a modern restaurant," Akly said.

French-American Brasserie has three levels, a 5,000-square-foot main dining room on the ground floor, a 4,000-square-foot mezzanine that includes the kitchen and a semi-private middle level overlooking the bar that seats up to 24.

A favorite element for Vergez is a spiral staircase leading up to a state-of-the-art media-ready private room that can seat 80 people for meetings, an element Vergez said was missing from his former location.

Diners and special groups can also take an elevator to a 3,000-square-foot rooftop patio, where Vergez plans to serve one of downtown's few non-hotel Sunday brunches starting in May.

And of course, no French restaurant would be complete without sidewalk café seating in front.

Vergez said he originally planned an October launch, but getting the space exactly right took more time.

Former regulars of Brasserie Le Coze, a veritable who's who of Atlanta, have been saying they cannot wait for the opening, Barry said.

A prime reason he courted Vergez was because he would bring a built-in local audience, he added.

"He isn't a big-name chef, but he is a world-class restaurateur who knows how to manage and operate a great restaurant," Barry said.

Vergez became Brasserie Le Coze's sole owner three years ago.

Barry said he expects to announce more restaurant tenants at Ivan Allen Plaza soon.