

## Aussie New Yorker plans to teach Des Moines how to do breakfast right

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(Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

Alexander Hall's new cafe is best defined by what it won't offer.

There will be no deep fryers, no TVs, no sandwiches wrapped in waxy to-go paper. You won't find a drive-thru or a brunch buffet.

Hall, a London-born, Australia-raised, New York-made restaurateur, recently moved to central Iowa with his wife, Whitney, a Des Moines native, to open an Australian-style cafe called St. Kilda that he says will buck many Iowa trends.

"There was a gap in the market for a modern, healthy style breakfast and lunch cafe," he said.

St. Kilda, named after Hall's hometown near Melbourne, is scheduled to open May 1 on the ground floor of Harbach Lofts, a former furniture warehouse being renovated into apartments at Southwest Fifth Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway.

The cafe will serve seasonal, plated breakfast items. Nothing is deep fried — only baked, poached or toasted, Hall said. It will feature house-made granola and bread, single-source coffee and a full bar.

"It's a lighter, healthier breakfast but done in an unpretentious way," said the chatty, bearded Australian. "It appeals to a big, broad spectrum of the population. You can be, like, a young hipster coming in to have a coffee or a family coming in with a group of kids."

A full-service cafe, St. Kilda will offer seated meals rather than the kind of pay-at-the-counter service Hall says has taken the joy out of breakfast.

"People are looking for something that's a little more sophisticated that is slightly more service-oriented," he said.

"It's more of an experience," Whitney Hall added. "You get to enjoy the lighting and the amazing architecture and have an amazing cup of coffee."

The cafe will occupy about 3,000 square feet in the 110-year-old building, with seating for about 80 inside, including a mezzanine available for rent.

The Halls recently gave the Register a tour of the space, which is still under construction. Broad wooden pillars, exposed brick and metal beams provide an industrial look. Large glass windows line the front of the building. A patio will be added outside.

"I like the rawness of it," he said. "Some of the spaces I looked at, the landlord goes about making it a vanilla box, and that's exactly what we don't want. We wanted something that had more unique features to it."

The Halls' story is a familiar one in Des Moines, where the lure of family and cheaper living often pulls back native Iowans who left for larger cities.

Whitney and Alexander met in New York City. She worked in management for a hair-care products firm and he was busy launching cafes.

Ultimately, the couple would open five coffee shops in Manhattan and Brooklyn with names such as Milk Bar, Blue Bird and Brunswick.

Last year, with their first child on the way, the couple decided to sell the coffee shops and move to Des Moines.

"Every time I come here I realize there is so much development and so many things happening but there is also lots of opportunity here," he said.

St. Kilda takes shape as several other cafes and coffee shops come to Des Moines. The new Hy-Vee, which features a Starbucks and a full-service restaurant, is opening three blocks north. Another coffee shop is in the works two blocks east at the commercial development called 300mlk.

"There is plenty of room for everyone, but you have to be good," Hall said. "You can't just open ho-hum businesses anymore."