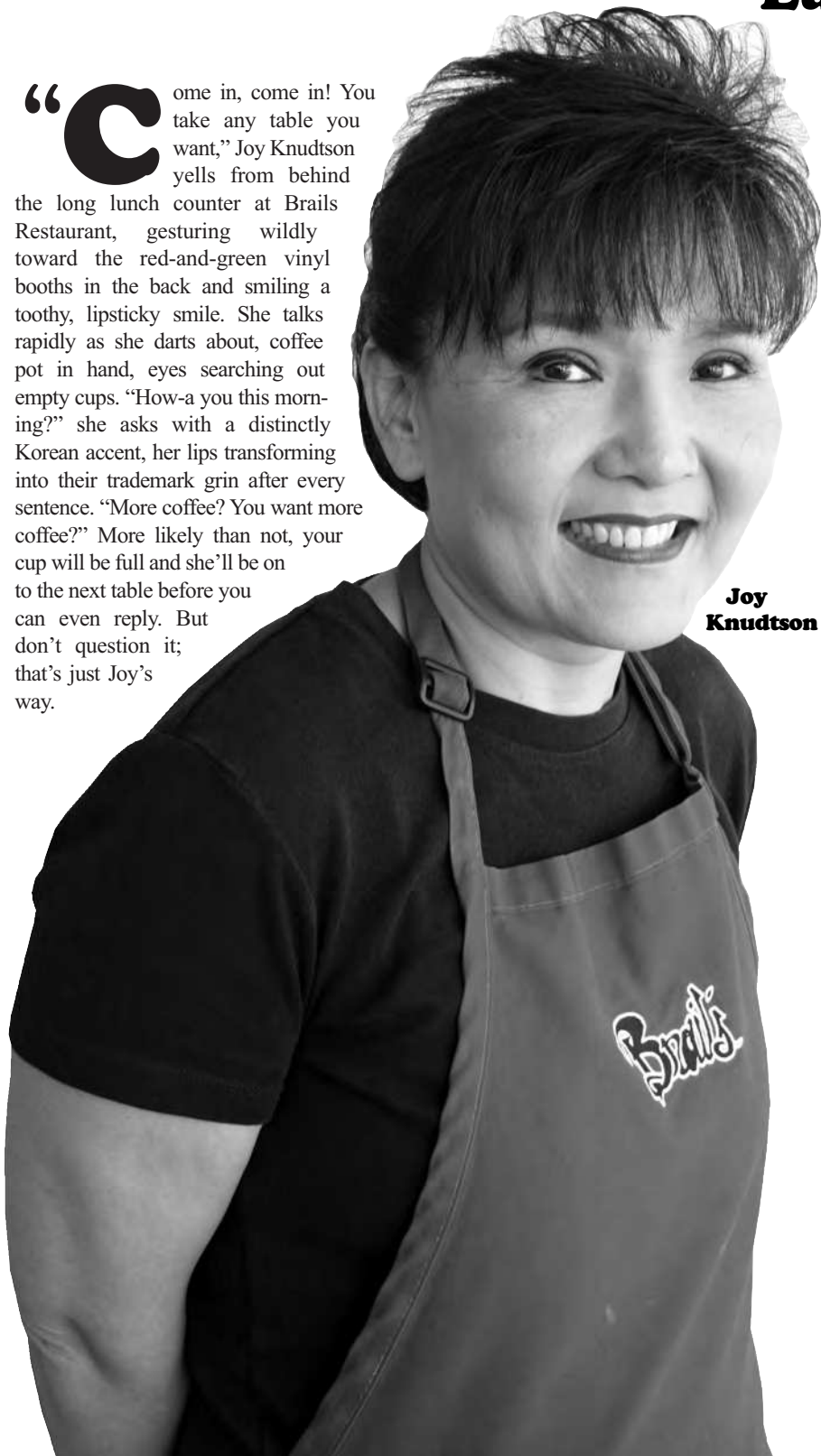


Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Eugene's "Joy"-ful greasy spoon

Story by Sara Wachter-Boettcher • Photos by Todd Cooper

"Come in, come in! You take any table you want," Joy Knudtson yells from behind the long lunch counter at Brails Restaurant, gesturing wildly toward the red-and-green vinyl booths in the back and smiling a toothy, lipsticky smile. She talks rapidly as she darts about, coffee pot in hand, eyes searching out empty cups. "How-a you this morning?" she asks with a distinctly Korean accent, her lips transforming into their trademark grin after every sentence. "More coffee? You want more coffee?" More likely than not, your cup will be full and she'll be on to the next table before you can even reply. But don't question it; that's just Joy's way.



Joy Knudtson

And Brails, an old-fashioned American diner at 1689 Willamette St., is Joy's restaurant. Since buying the business from her sister in the fall of 2001, the fit, well-dressed and always made-up 48-year-old has become the soul of Eugene's quintessential "greasy spoon," immediately befriending everyone who enters. Hung over college students, ladies meeting after church, middle-aged men stopping in for a weekday sandwich — all are greeted with Joy's energetic, welcoming presence. "I am kind of a people person," she says, flinging her hands up in the air and throwing her head back in a table-pounding, raucous fit of laughter, something she does often. "I get along with everyone, and I'm having fun with it!"

After spending years working in other people's restaurants — including a Chinese-Korean-Japanese establishment in Anchorage, Alaska, a bakery and café in Vancouver, Washington and a short stint as the co-owner of Brails back in the early '90s, when her sister first bought the place — Joy is ecstatic to run a restaurant on her own terms. For 60 hours each week, she flits around Brails in a frenzy of hard work and friendly words, building an enormous base of regular customers with her sincere, thorough service.

One such customer, Adam Kriz, a hammer thrower for Eugene's Team XO, became a Brails regular a few years ago, when he was a UO student. At first, he came in for the hash browns and bacon. "I was hung over and it was delicious," he says. But the kicker came a year and a half ago, when Joy offered to sponsor his track and field career with a stipend. "The terms and conditions under it, I believe, were that she would give me \$100 every month and then in return, I would pick up the \$100 every month," Kriz jokes. He now wears the Brails logo on the back of his jersey, proud of having Joy's support.

Joy's devotion to her customers sometimes borders on the obsessive; during one meal at Brails, don't be surprised if she comes by to thank you five or six times.

"You know how many times I thank the people?" she asks. "Probably 500 times per day. Not because I want to make a lot of money. No, that's not it; I don't really have to work. But I like it. When I come here, Brails is my life."

This determination is the other side of Joy, the side people don't always see when she's chatting with the regulars and serving up waffles or club sandwiches. "I want to be the best in Eugene," she says without a hint of modesty. This goal is what keeps Joy motivated, and what brings her satisfaction with life. "I'm not really business, but I know how to work," she says. "I'll work until my body doesn't listen."

Joy demands this same work ethic from her eight employees. They can't be lazy, and they can't be messy. "When I work, they gotta work," she says. "I bend over and clean up. I *do* things." That's why she likes her newest hire, Sara Taylor, a Brails regular. Last month, Joy was working a weekend brunch shift that was busier than expected. Taylor, who was eating with her friends, saw her frantically working. A veteran waitress herself, Taylor offered to help out. Joy hired her on the spot. On her way out, Taylor stops to give Joy a hug.

Most bosses would never run a business the way Joy runs Brails, but Joy isn't most bosses. Instead, she treats her employees like a tender but firm mother: She doesn't bark out orders, but her boundaries are clear. Ian Gray, a UO student who's worked at Brails for two years, knows this firsthand. Once, he showed up for a breakfast shift after a late night out. It was early — earlier than he was scheduled to work, Gray claims — and business was slow, so he crept into the back office to sleep off a hangover. Pretty soon, Joy opened the door and found him. "You sleep now," she told him, pointing her finger. "But when I come wake you up, you work!" Two hours later, Brails was bustling and she needed Gray's help. He worked like mad for the rest of the day.

Although Joy was lenient with Gray, he knows her limits. "Don't talk back to her — that gets you fired," he says, along with two

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