

JOY IN THE WHITEAKER

BRAILS WILL BRING ITS 'BEST HANGOVER' BREAKFASTS TO NEW SPOT ON 5TH AVENUE BY RICK LEVIN



JOY KNUDTSON

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Joy Knudtson is a force of nature. As owner and operator of Brails Restaurant in south Eugene, Sang Joo (aka Joy) Knudtson provides a big measure of the joint's appeal. On any given morning you can find her zipping around the linoleum floor of this old-fashioned American diner with the antic patterns of a human hurricane — part field marshal, part peppy maestro, all cult of personality. Her demeanor is flashy, welcoming and entertainingly out-loud, like a low-impact carnival barker, and the perpetual activity to which she subjects her environment belies a sly watchfulness that comes from running a busy café for the past 18 years.

"Honey, I'll be right with you," Knudtson tells me as she floats out the swinging front door, only to appear five minutes later from the opposite direction at the back of the restaurant. I wonder if she's finally split herself in two.

Such doubling seems almost feasible for an overflowing personality and, indeed, it might serve Knudtson well these days: She'll soon be opening a second Brails on 5th Avenue on the outskirts of the Whiteaker neighborhood at the spot of the former Keystone Café, which recently closed its

doors after 40 years in business.

As with Knudtson herself, Brails is something of an institution in Eugene. A classic American-style greasy spoon in the Edward Hopper mold, the place has taken the prize for "best hangover breakfast" in *EW*'s Best of Eugene reader's poll 12 years running. During the breakfast rush, waiters scurry heaping plates of eggs, bacon and perfectly crisped hashbrowns to patrons ranging from college kids, old-timers and members of Eugene's tattooed glitterati.

Sitting down over coffee, Knudtson fills me in on the new enterprise. She says that she really had no interest in opening a second restaurant, but then her daughter graduated high school and she had an empty nest. "I thought, 'I gotta be busier.'" The old Keystone location went on the market, and she got a wild hair.

"I wasn't really planning to do anything, but I got interested," she says, smiling. "I think this was meant to be."

The interior of Brails on 5th will be similar to the original, Knudtson says, but the new place will feature outdoor seating as well. Fans of Brails can rest assured that the menu will be the same, though she says she's introducing buckwheat pancakes to the mix, as well as

veggie biscuits and gravy. The addition of espresso and cinnamon rolls will give the place the feel of a café.

"I'm pretty excited about it and I want to make people happy over there, for the Whiteaker people," she says. "I'm going to try my best to make it cozy. You can hang out over there, drink coffee and whatever it is."

The city permitting process delayed the planned opening in mid-September. I ask Knudtson about the new opening date. She contemplates the ceiling for a moment. "I'm shooting for, let's say, Oct. 1," she says suddenly, gazing at me with a bit of a mad-scientist gleam. I get the distinct feeling I've just been made privy to breaking news.

Then inspiration truly seems to strike. "Opening day, I'm going to serve biscuits and gravy, free!" she says, setting both hands on the table. "Cinnamon rolls, free!"

I scramble to get it all down. We both laugh a bit. "I feed people pretty good," Knudtson says, winking at me. "That's my quality. I'm not stingy — let's say that. I don't have a whole bunch of money, but I'm not cheap."

Brails in south Eugene is open weekdays, 7 am to 2 pm, weekends 7 am to 3 pm at 1689 Willamette Street. The new Brails (tentatively opening Oct. 1) is located at the former Keystone Café, 395 W. 5th Avenue.

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