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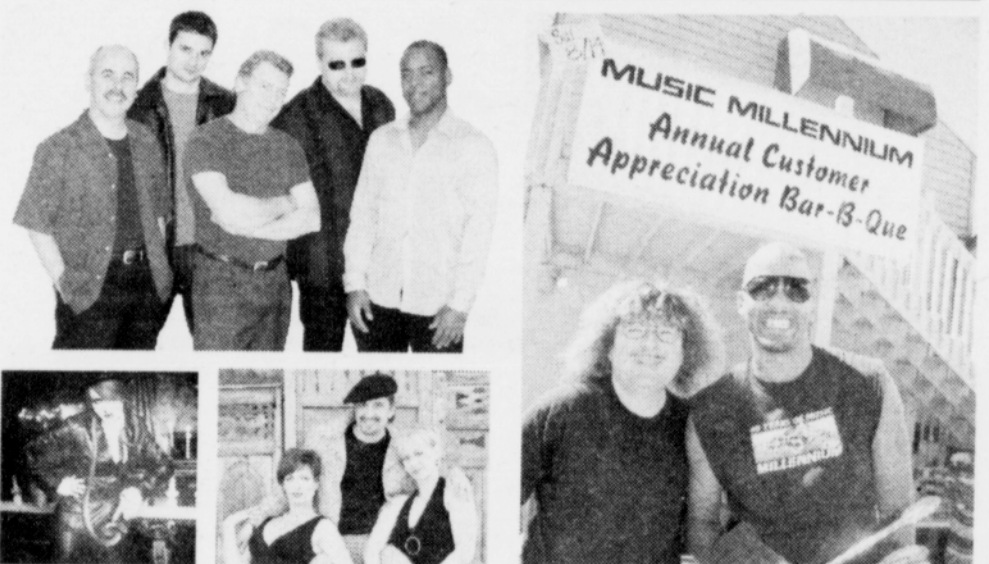
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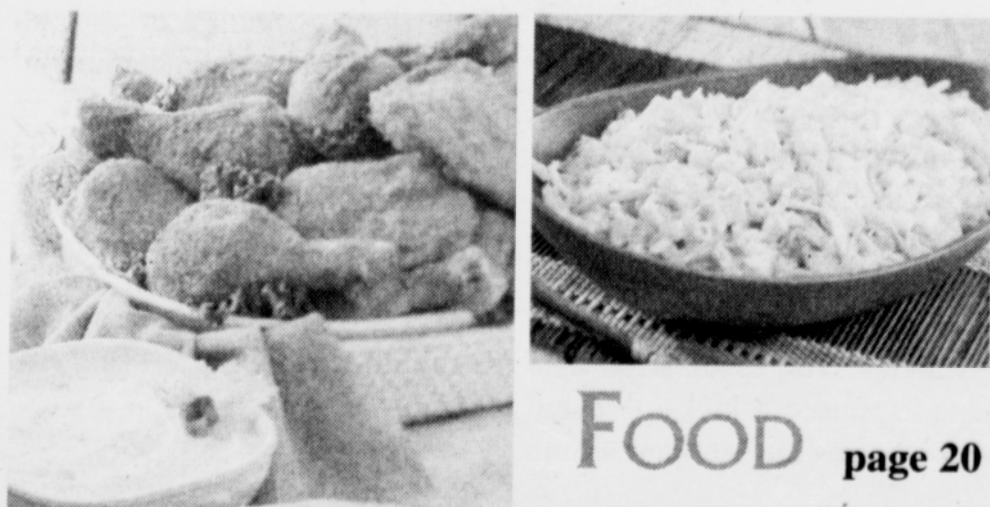
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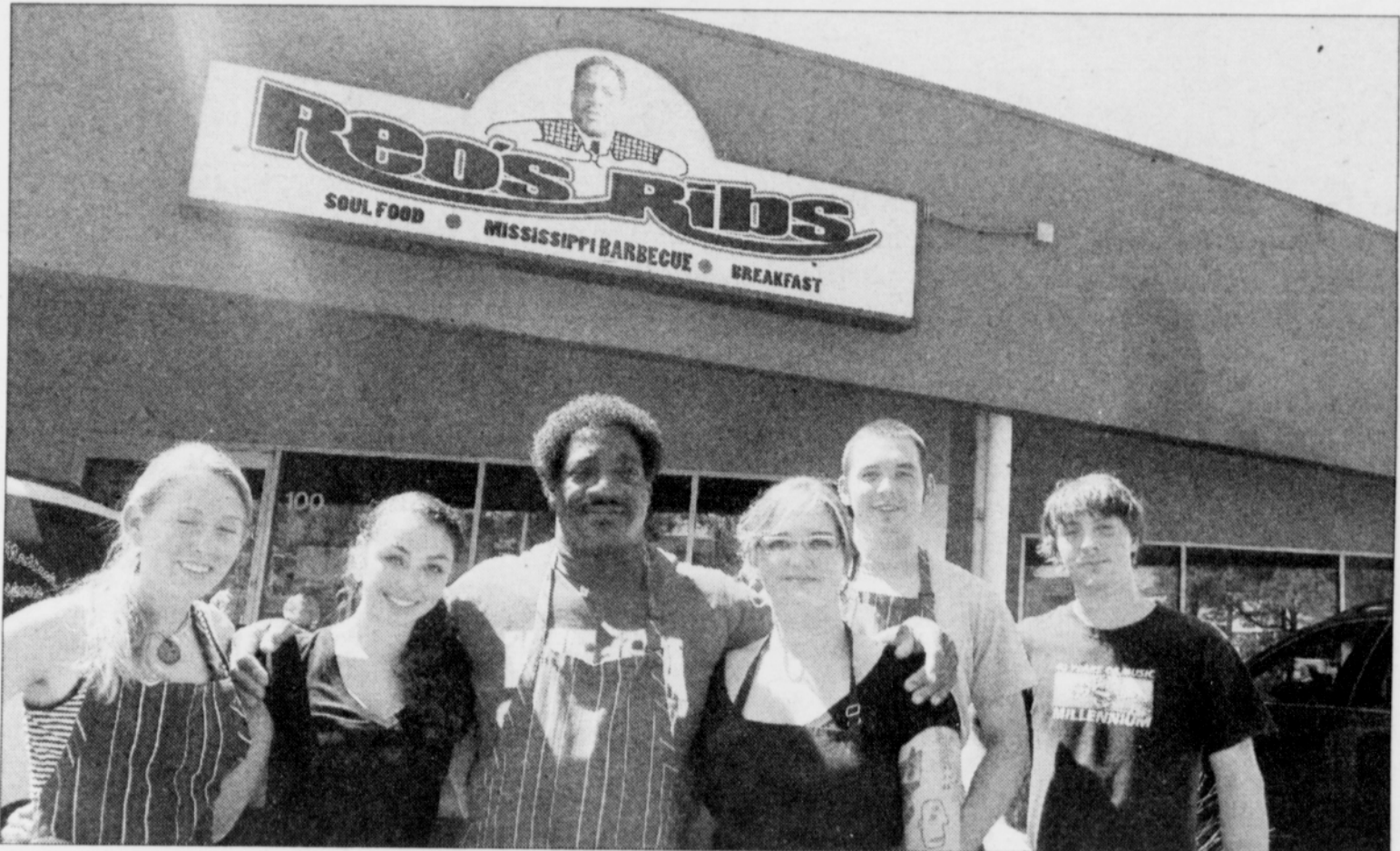


PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Reo's Ribs owner Reo Varnado is surrounded by his employees at his soul food and Mississippi barbecue restaurant on Southwest Macadam Avenue.

Undaunted

Reo's thrives despite complaints, racial barbs

BY JAKE THOMAS
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Last April, Reo Varnado opened the doors to his rib joint in a location that he thought would be ideal.

Since opening up Reo's Ribs Restaurant and Catering in a small retail strip on Southwest Macadam Avenue, he said that business has been good, with customers flocking to his nationally-recognized eatery to buy barbecue, fried okra, and sweet potato pie.

However, relations with the neighbors haven't been as rosy.

Varnado cooks his meats in two large outdoor barbecues that constantly billow out smoke, to the ire of nearby residents and other businesses.

He said that conflict with neighbors has steadily escalated, but he's determined to keep his eatery open and thriving.

Varnado, the uncle of hip hop legend Snoop Dogg, originally opened up his restaurant off of TV Highway in Aloha in 1999. He

received a favorable write-up in both the Oregonian and Gourmet Magazine, which called his barbecued meats some of the best west of Chicago.

After the lease expired, Varnado decided it was time to move on. He was considering a move back to his native Mississippi after having a hard time finding a suitable place to set up shop, until he came across the current property at 6141 S.W. Macadam Avenue. He and his business partner, Myra Girod, secured the property and opened its doors last spring.

Neighbors have complained to local media that the smoke has diminished the livability of their homes. According to Varnado, a wine shop in the retail strip, which did not return a call for comment by press time, has complained that customers are unhappy about the smoky flavor of their wine. Neighbors also have grips about live music played at the barbecue joint on the weekends.

"I can't go to work happy. I have to watch my back everyday," said Varnado, who asked the Portland police to periodically check up on him.

He said that his tires to his car have been slashed, and the barbecue has been vandalized. Varnado also said that people have en-

tered the restaurant during business hours cursing at him and demanding money back. He claims people have tried to provoke fights with him. He also said he has been verbally harassed by passersby who say they are determined to force him out, and people will take his picture and then run off. One evening, he said, someone followed him all the way to his northeast Portland home.

The smell of smoke is present the minute you pull into the parking lot at the southwest eatery. Inside, Varnado banter with a customer about making sweet tea, while employees scurry about carrying plates of barbecue. Two large portraits of Snoop Dogg adorn the walls.

Varnado has three pitch-black barbecues that he uses oak, black walnut, and fruitwood to heat, saying enhances the flavor of the meat. He seldom uses the largest of his barbecues- which is easily longer than 12 feet, higher than 6, and is adorned with an ornate "Reo's Ribs"- because it particularly upsets neighbors.

"All hell breaks loose," said Varnado, still wearing a hairnet and apron while taking a break to feast on a plate of fried cat fish

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