

**Siuslaw News**  
**P.O. Box 10**  
**Florence, OR 97439**

# Opinion

## EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE  
 For the Siuslaw News

# Our local Food Service Workers



**(Editor's note: In recognition of National Foodservice Workers Day tomorrow, Siuslaw News's Catherine Rourke is spotlighting some of those in our community who make eating out more than just having a meal...)**

The heat is on. It's 6 p.m. on a Saturday night with long lines forming at Bay Street restaurant doors. Servers and bussers scurry about as the whirl of cocktail blenders clashes with the clatter of plates. Hosts frantically add more names to an already burgeoning waitlist of anxious hungry patrons while bartenders rush to fill beverage orders.

Beyond the swinging doors lies another dimension in the back of the house, a realm of heat, chaos, grease and sweat. The cacophony of shouting cooks, chopping knives and sizzling saucepans fills the air as kitchen workers labor in a frenetic pace.

It's multitasking to the max executed with timed precision, yet foodservice workers take it in stride with amazing aplomb in a ballet between the floor, the kitchen, the front door — or even an outside patio.

Then the kids spill milk all over the table. A foreign tourist wants to know why he got beef when he ordered the chicken fried steak. Six plates sit double-parked in the hot window as the chef yells for someone to "move 'em out." A diner complains that his soup is cold and another says the salsa is too hot. The kitchen loses a ticket and food is delivered to the wrong table. The eggs are too runny or the steak is overcooked. The dish pit runs out of clean spoons and the daily special suddenly appears on the "86" board.

Everyone demands a window table and nobody wants to sit near



RICH COLTON PHOTO

From left: Three Rivers Casino Resort bartender Chris Wohl, voted Florence's "Best Bartender" in 2015; Siuslaw Riverside restaurateur Melonie Rollin with server Devin Robertson and cook-server-bartender Katy Bailey; Mercedes Gortz, an 18-year veteran in the foodservice industry.



PHOTOS BY CATHRINE ROURKE

the door.

Then the 10-top asks for separate checks.

"Organized chaos."

That's how Katy Bailey, a cook, server and bartender at Siuslaw Riverside restaurant, describes it. With 21 years in foodservice, she has seen it all. Still, she couldn't imagine trading the stress and splattered apron for a desk job.

"It's a fun business and I really thrive on it," she said. "No two days are ever alike."

Her colleague Devin Marie Robertson, a longtime server from Las Vegas, agrees. "Time flies and I feel really good at the end of a shift after making people happy," she said. Their boss, Riverside restaurateur Melonie Rollin, offers another take.

"It's all about having a service-oriented heart. It's also about community spirit. We love throwing a party for this town every day."

But foodservice is no picnic. With long hours without a meal of their own, servers must remain stalwart while fulfilling every whim, demand and expectation of a fickle public. Tip income often resembles Russian Roulette.

Drunks, deadbeats and "stiffs" can ruin a shift while coffee breaks, sick days and holidays remain a fantasy. Burning feet and burning indignation often accompany the job description along with burnt toast.

From breakfast cafes, casinos and coffee houses to fast-food restaurants and fine dining establishments, we asked foodservice workers the same question: Why do it?

Invariably, the answers remained the same: a genuine love for serving humanity. In that, the work transcends a job to become a calling.

"It's all about connecting with people," said Firehouse Restaurant owner Marla McKenzie. "It's a good feeling to see empty plates

when they leave, but it's more important to see the smile on their faces."

Initially drawn to slinging hash for the cash, many foodservice workers stay for the flexibility and variety. Mercedes Gortz, an 18-year industry veteran, always knew she wanted to work in foodservice. "I love what I do and it's a passion," she said. "It gave me more time with my four kids."

Surprisingly, it's no different for fast-food workers.

"I started in this business when I was young," said Bryan Ryves, shift manager at McDonald's. Eight years of foodservice have turned him into a master multitasker as he pivots between the drive-up window, the prep kitchen and the front counter.

Breakfast workers are a special breed. Like Bryan, Blythe Robinson rises long before dawn to serve coffee and eggs at Fresh Harvest Café.

"People are happiest when they're eating," she said. "I put that food down and watch grumpy faces suddenly turn into happy ones. Servers just aren't allowed to have a bad day."

Blythe ought to know. The 31-year-old has been pouring the love along with the coffee since age 18 and prefers breakfast to other shifts. "People just want to eat fast, get their caffeine fix and go," she said.

Even younger servers can find the silver lining in their breakfast shifts where caffeine makes the world go 'round.

Elyse Hickson, age 21, began working at the Little Brown Hen at 16. "The regulars bring a smile and brighten my day every time and make my job so worth it," she said.

Elizabeth Wheeler, 15, a busser at the Little Brown Hen, added, "My favorite part of being a morning server is when a grumpy customer finally gets their first cup of coffee of the day and I get to watch that frown turn upside down."

Sandra Mehuron, chef at Fresh Harvest Café, says she loves the creativity as well as the challenges. She's seen her share of them after 44 years in the industry. So has Fresh Harvest restaurateur Gilmar Ortiz, who has performed every job in

foodservice from chief bottle washer, literally, as well as busser, server, bartender and host.

"In serving, you're in a constant position to give," he said. "It takes a special type of people who humble themselves to serve others and that is true leadership."

1285 Restobar restaurateur Kurt Hargens summed it up this way: "I want guests to feel like they're coming to my home for lunch or dinner. They should have a warm and welcoming experience. It's about making them feel important. If we can do that, then we're doing our job."

Across the street at the Waterfront Depot, Marianne Brisbane, a 20-year veteran restaurateur, shared another perspective. "We love to make people happy. It sounds simple, but you must have a servant's heart in order to do it," she said.

Depot employee Bill Broderick has tended bar for over 35 years. "This job allows one's personality to shine, while working with a team," he said. "I love that this profession allows me to not be a 9-to-5 drone."

Craig Stewart, a longtime Bay Street server currently at the Waterfront Depot, started out as a busser at the ICM and then went into construction for 14 years. "It was backbreaking work," he said. "In foodservice, I get to build relationships with people. If people have a great dining experience, that puts a smile on my face."

Chris Wohl at Blue Bill's Sports Bar in Three Rivers Casino Resort echoes that sentiment. "When you're able to do something special for a customer and then see that look of appreciation, it's so rewarding. It's all about being personable even when you're busy. I make it a point to greet and converse with customers even when the pace is crazy."

Perhaps that explains why Chris was voted "Best Bartender" in the 2015 "Best of Florence." Still, the father of one toddler and another kid on the way admits that foodservice can pose some challenges. "Finding the balance between work and family life is the tough part," he said. "We miss a lot of family events."

Nights, weekends and holidays all remain de rigeur for the industry as

people gravitate to bars and restaurants whether they feel up or down.

"Sometimes we even have to be psychologists," Chris said. "I'm often amazed at what folks tell me."

Martin Luther King Jr. must have had foodservice workers in mind when he wrote: "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." Yet there are no statues erected for their heroics or postage stamps in their honor.

That's why Sept. 25 is National Foodservice Workers Day, dedicated to the 15 million cheerful troopers employed in the nation's largest private sector workforce. Most will be toiling on their national holiday — at the broiler, in the dish pit, behind the bar, at the door and on the floor — sacrificing their Sunday so the rest of us can enjoy ours.

Foodservice workers are often the first people tourists meet upon their arrival, creating a first and lasting impression. That makes them ambassadors for our community as well as stewards for our celebrations. Every summer they miss the parties and picnics, the weddings and graduations, the fireworks and the cook-outs.

As consummate professionals, foodservice workers deserve far more credit for their mental, emotional and physical prowess. Portland-based veteran server Paul Paz is on a mission to elevate the status of foodservice workers to a professional level. His organization provides invaluable "tips" at WaitersWorld.com.

The Siuslaw Riverside will offer a "Service Industry Night" on September 25, with special prices for foodservice workers. "Everyone should experience this industry sometime in their life," restaurateur Rollins said. "It teaches you everything you will ever need to know."

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The Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County.

Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed. All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification.

Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity. Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received.

Libelous and anonymous letters or poetry will not be published.

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