



Meet Me at the Korner

Open 15 hours a day, seven days a week, the Kountry Korner Cafe is a community eatery that customers have counted on for decades

BY MEGAN AULT REGNERUS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

It's DARK AND QUIET AT 5:30 A.M., WHEN THE DOOR TO the Kountry Korner Cafe is unlocked. It's not the owner, Betty Nason, with the key, a waitress, or even the long-time chef Joe Talbot. It's a customer, one of 10–20 Dutch farmers, machinists, mechanics and other working men who live around the Four Corners area just to the west of Bozeman who will unlock the door and brew the day's first pot of coffee. For these men, it's a daily ritual that happens seven days a week, holidays included.

"One of the guys was always waiting for me when I opened, so I finally said, 'Here's the key,'" Nason explains. "He did it for about 30 years."

The guys know better than to turn the lights on, though, and instead start their day sipping coffee and trading jibes in dim light. "There'll be a line of cars outside waiting for the lights to come on," says Maynard Flikkema, a farmer from nearby Churchill who frequents the cafe.

Before the lights come on, someone pays for the coffee, and the daily journal is filled out with information on who showed up that day, weather, politics, and most important, who got stuck with the bill.

"Each morning we guess a number between 1 and 1,000," says Krista Nason, Nason's daughter-in-law who often shows up to work while the



Doris McCall arrives for work every morning at 4:30 to bake pies, averaging 8 to 10 pies per day in the summer, fewer in the winter. Her record is 45 in one day, she says.

**Kountry Korner
owner Betty Nason**



**Waitress
Debbie
Laddusaw
has been
working
for Nason
since 1975.**

coffee bunch is there. She flips through the pages, smiling at some of the entries. “George gets stuck with it a lot.”

“There are a lot of business deals done in that time of the morning, too,” adds Flikkema.

The Kountry Korner Cafe is a unique holdout, especially when placed in the context of a changing and steadily growing

town like Bozeman, where big box stores and national chain businesses are an ever-breeding part of the landscape.

Watch Nason, past normal retirement age (don’t ask her, she won’t tell you) but decidedly “put together” with a look that is more businesswoman than farm wife, and you see that despite the area’s restaurant chains that she is on to something here — something that has been working for over 30 years.

“Look at the noon hour here: It’s hard to find a parking spot,” says Flikkema, not quite concealing a bit of crankiness.

They show up for the cafe’s specialty: comfort food, in all its various forms. Meatloaf, chicken fried steak, burgers and fries, homemade soups and pies are all regular staples here. On weekend mornings you’ll find women who definitely do look like farm wives with hair nets rushing from the buffet line to the back of the restaurant, shuttling full and empty trays of caramelized French toast, hashbrowns, bacon, sausage, biscuits and

George Alberda pours the coffee for Maynard Flikkema, left, Dan Kimm, Joe Braaksma and Jon Alberda before the doors officially open at the Kountry Korner Cafe outside of Bozeman. For years, a group of locals have been arriving an hour or so before the lights come on to have coffee and talk over the weather and crop prices before heading out into their fields or off to their jobs.



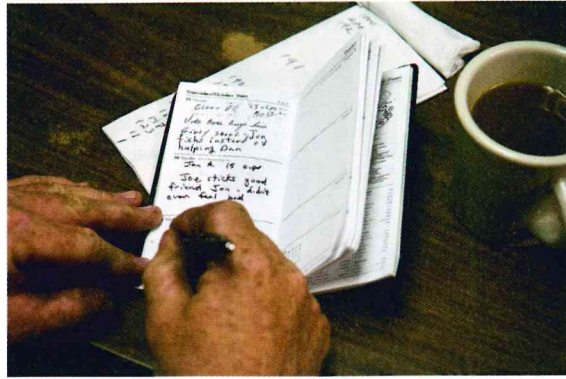
gravy, egg casseroles, pancakes, pastries — the list goes on. If you're lucky enough to escape without a gut-ache for ignoring your limits, you're in the minority.

You might imagine these recipes were handed down through generations of Nason's ancestral matriarchs. She laughs at the notion. She grew up in Cut Bank where, "Mom was a school teacher. I didn't even know how to make gravies or soups. I hired good people and learned from them."

Many of those "good people" have remained loyal to Nason and the cafe for years. One waitress, Debbie Laddusaw, began working for her in 1975.

"The running joke is that I've sold her twice and she's kept coming back," says Nason.

She's referring to the fact that before she opened the Kountry Korner Cafe (which originally opened across the street and up a block), she co-owned and operated two other restaurants. Laddusaw worked for her at both restaurants, then



The breakfast club keeps a journal noting how many were in the party that day, and who picked the wrong number and had to cover the coffee bill.

stayed on with the new owners, but eventually always followed Nason to her next venture.

One of those early restaurants was called the Butcher Boy, a drive-in restaurant located on Main Street in Bozeman where Arby's is now.

"We sold something called a hushburger back then," recalls Nason. "It was a hamburger patty dipped in batter — deep fried — and served with fries for 25 cents."

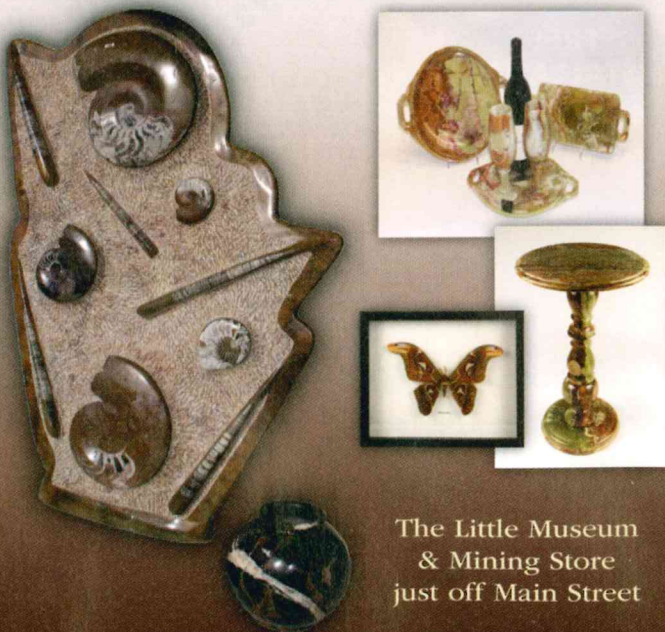
Nason doesn't sell hushburgers anymore. That's not to imply that the business didn't do well. "It

was probably one of the most profitable things I've ever done, but it gets real boring to make burgers," she says.

To watch Nason rushing around, greeting customers, making calls, checking on catering events — she's also owned and operated Gallatin Valley Catering since 1971 — it seems she's not someone who tolerates boredom for long.

"Chaos actually makes her tick," says Laddusaw. "She's got to be busy."

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Home-cooked comfort food awaits patrons of the Kountry Korner Cafe west of Bozeman.

How many hours does she work a week?
 Forty?
 Nason rolls her eyes. "Probably 50 or 60," she says. "People ask me why I'm not retiring. Because I love it, and I'm still having fun."

"She wouldn't close. What would she do with herself?" says Krista.
 But visit a bit more with Krista, Laddusaw and the cafe regulars, and you get the feeling that the question is also, if the cafe closed, what would they all do?

"The regular customers keep me here," says Laddusaw. "I'd have a hard time at a sit-down job."
 And for many of the regulars, the cafe is more than just a place they like to hang out. For some of the men, they depend on it for meals, coming in two, even three times a day. In fact, if they don't show up for their meals, "We call them on the phone, check up on them," says Laddusaw.

"Yeah, there's a bunch of them like that," says Krista. "Rudy, Jake — if they don't come in because they're sick, people bring them food."

"And the girls are really good about knowing

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when customers' birthdays are," says Nason.

While Nason may be the "business brains" behind the Kountry Korner, concern for customers is still kept in mind while dealing with outside forces like a struggling economy and rising food prices. "We have had to raise prices, but we try to keep them down as much as we can because we have a lot of people with fixed incomes," Nason says.

This concern is shared both ways, Nason insists, and goes a long ways back. "Back in 1986 when we



Nason's lock collection, started 20 to 30 years ago, hangs in a display case on a wall inside the restaurant. Nason said she just likes the look of the old locks.

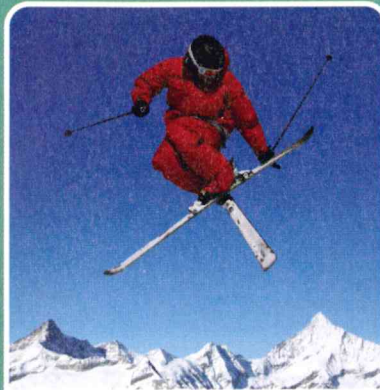
moved the restaurant from the old space to the new, all the regulars showed up with farm equipment and helped us move over here."

More recently, one of the waitress' house burned down, and all the "morning guys" combined their money to buy her gift certificates to Target and WalMart to replace the destroyed items.

Make no mistake, this is the community cafe that Betty Nason built, built with coffee, comfort food and the sturdiness of time, and it isn't going away any time soon.

"It's a unique place," says Laddusaw. "If it ever closed we've all agreed we'd set up a stump in the parking lot and still sit around together." ❏

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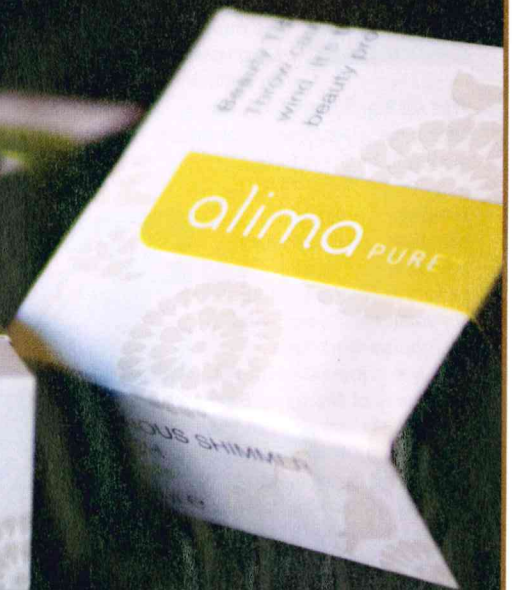
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