

Camp 18

Though the food is predictable, the setting is singular

Gordon Smith never dreamed of opening a restaurant. The grand, elemental and elegant hall he erected at Camp 18 was intended to house a logging museum. And for about a year in the early 1980s it did.

“We learned quick that a logging museum wouldn’t make enough money to pay the electric bill,” said Smith, wearing a flannel shirt, well-worn jeans, work boots and a pair of Camp 18 suspenders. “So we turned it into a restaurant.”

Though the official logging museum is now housed in a separate, much smaller building on the compound, the entirety of Camp 18 remains a paean to local timber. Dotted the property are monolithic tools, big and small, some of which may’ve helped build the place. There are carvings, some 10 feet tall, of wildlife and even Smith himself. Everything is unfathomably heavy.

The crown jewel, though, isn’t the equipment, art, or the water-wheel out back — it’s the building itself. And while zooming by on U.S. Highway 26, that majesty is obscured. Even standing on the front porch can be deceptive. Only upon yanking open the heaving doors does one realize — the space almost magically expands, seemingly doubling in size.

It’s reminiscent of a ski lodge. Long straight logs ring the walls and peak at a high-ceilinged roof. A majestic, taxidermied mountain lion looms as antler chandeliers twinkle over cavernous fireplaces, hulking ironwork and raw, stunning tables. All of it trembles, however, beneath the building’s backbone, an 85-foot long ridgepole that weighs some 25 tons. And while not of such distinct craftsmanship or fine materials, the meals at Camp 18 covet a similar scale.

The menus are like the plates: full. The fare is mostly of American diners and red meat and potatoes home cooking. Camp 18 prefers “logger-style meals,” which about hits the nail on the head. At the same time, Camp 18 also treats the kitchen sort of like a saw mill, churning out meals quickly, uniformly, and without regard for finer detail.

Offering both hot and cold sandwiches, I tried both: a Corned Beef (hot), and a Clubhouse (cold). On toasted rye, the Corned Beef (\$10.50) came with all the requisites (sauerkraut, Swiss cheese and Thousand Island dressing), but the

acids outweighed the creams. The beef was thick and juicy. With it came a salad I was dismayed to pay an extra dollar for. It was mostly lettuce, akin to ready-made, not-too-fresh, pre-mixed salad-in-a-bag. (Besides clam chowder, the other sides — fries, soup and potato salad — carry no up-charge.) More disturbing were two thin slices of ham that I uncovered deep in the bowl. (On another trip I found no seemingly errant meats in the salad.)

The Clubhouse (\$11.95) was by the books, and I enjoyed it more than the Corned Beef. The bacon was salty against the sweet tomatoes and mayonnaise, and the bread was ever-so-slightly toasted, but still mostly soft. The slices were thin, as if halved, and in a sandwich featuring three slices plus ham and turkey, I appreciated not filling up on bread. (For those wanting more starch, the Clubhouse came with a mountain of thick-cut fries.)

On another trip I tried the Cheeseburger (\$9.95). It was served on a sesame seed bun and



The Cheeseburger is robust and comes with plenty of onions.

A paean to local timber, Camp 18’s exterior features carvings of wildlife and people.



offered but one surprise: that the tomato came only upon specific request. (An absurd pile of onions were delivered no questions asked). It’s difficult to say with certainty, but the third-pound patty seemed to have been formed by hand. It was robust, fully-cooked, and there was nothing special about it. It’s a burger you’ve had 100 times before. It won’t wow you, nor let you down.

There are a few pockets of Camp 18’s dinner menu that skew a little less predictably. They do so not by innovating but by looking further back. As one diner remarked to his companion, “Ooh honey, they have Liver and Onions! You don’t see that much anymore.” There are other outliers, like an 18-ounce Porterhouse (\$32.95) and Pan Fried Razor Clams (\$25.95). I went with the Pot Roast

(\$18.95), which my server said was quite popular.

The thick slabs of chuck were ample and lean. The meat was slow-cooked and mostly tender enough to split without a knife. The dish, with garlic mashed potatoes and vegetables, was doused in beef gravy. It was salty, thick and smooth. But the gravy was also a bit of a rouse, masking the fact that the celery, carrots and onions had not been cooked along with the beef. As an afterthought, the veggies suffered.

Despite my crowing, I enjoyed my trips to Camp 18 — not so much for the food but for the environment Smith has created (which includes a jovial family-type staff). One night before closing we started chatting, and it’s clear he still delights in the space. Smith’s eyes lit up as he talked about the specifics of the building’s creation and the history of timber in the region. He pointed behind me, to one of the many old photos. It showed two men standing on a saw blade that was dug into a tree trunk. “That’s from 1915,” Smith said. “My dad and my uncle.”

Indeed, Camp 18’s timber heritage is deeply important to Smith — perhaps even more so than the food it serves. Nonetheless, he’s succeeded in creating that logging museum after all — it just happens to have an oversized cafeteria.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND’S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

Camp 18

Rating: ★ ★ ★

42362 U.S. Highway 26, Seaside

503-755-1818

www.camp18restaurant.com

HOURS: 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

PRICE: \$\$ – Entrées generally hover around \$10 to \$25.

SERVICE: Warm, family atmosphere

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Not recommended.

DRINKS: Soda, tea, coffee, wine, beer, spirits (in upstairs lounge)

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region