

# Loose Kaboose

An American diner as familiar as the back of your hand

Let's be honest: The Loose Kaboose drew me because it's funky.

The greasy spoon diner, which wishes it were housed in an actual train car rather than a double-wide trailer, is on the south end of Long Beach. The sign boasts a little of everything: fish and chips, oysters, burgers, chowder, steak and pizza. I figured it was at least worth a look.

It was, as I hoped and suspected, kitschy and perhaps of another time — one much belying a mid-90s opening. (The restaurant has changed owners since, I'm told). Just the same, The Loose Kaboose would've been similarly — or more earnestly — at home overlooking a bowling alley in 1985.

Trot up the few stairs through the front door, and find yourself in the kitchen. To the left is the darkly carpeted dining room. It's curated roughly; most every inch of surface is coated in something or another. The tables feature cut-out Xeroxes of old newspapers and tabloids,

detailing railroad and oceanic lore. Dollar bills are stapled all over the walls and ceilings. Most have been drawn on. Some of the currencies are foreign. (Eventually, the sign says, the money moves on to support the local Boys and Girls Club.) A model train track rings the ceiling, appearing as if it hasn't moved in years. It is matched with a myriad of rail memorabilia, from

old signage to train tapestries, paintings, photos, drapes and wallpaper. There are, too, odd jokes, like the laminated poster of "Hobo Signs and Symbols" and the mock "Model Railroad Disease" flyer. It was dusty, weird and more engaging than sterility. (Also: not for fainthearted neat freaks.)

Though he dressed the part of neither, my sever doubled as cook. I appreciated his brusque, no-nonsense, devil-may-care attitude. There was loads on the menu. Probably too much. The server/cook took my order and then returned to the kitchen. The deep fryer and the grill began to sizzle.

First I had the special: three-piece Cod Fish and Chips (\$9.95). Rather than three I received four reasonably sized, golden nuggets of fried cod. The beer-battered crust was thick and crisp, fully sealing the whitefish inside. The cod itself simply was — not impressively fresh, nor fishy. Adequate. (And here begins what is

essentially the story of all the Loose Kaboose's ingredients in a nutshell: OK.) The French fries were thick and attentively cooked. The coleslaw was creamy and mayo-heavy, slightly sweet with a dash of pepper. Together the plate of food was substantial.

The one-third-pound Burger (\$6.95) was recommended, and I enjoyed it even though it retained — and then dispensed — all together too much liquid. One bite caused a rain of light grease to cascade onto the plate. Still, the pre-formed frozen patty was thick, cooked through, and served on a fresh, thick and soft bun with ample roughage. There was everything you might expect: lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, cheese and mayo. Like the fries, the accompanying onion rings were well cooked — a crunchy outer seal and a soft, juicy, oily inner.

A small pizza (9 inches, \$8.99 with three toppings) was doughy and no more than the sum of its parts. The marinara sauce was sweet and bland. I appreciated the two layers of cheese — one over the sauce with another sprinkling atop the ingredients. And while little had stood head and shoulders above the rest of the menu at the Loose Kaboose, there are much



The special three-piece Cod Fish and Chips came with four pieces of fried cod, thick French fries and creamy coleslaw.

The Clubhouse (\$8.95) was a take on the traditional club that added ham.



better places to eat pizza. As the sign says: It's a "diner," and you're best off staying in that lane.

To that end I tried some of the sandwiches. The Clubhouse (\$8.95) was a take on the traditional club that added ham. Particularly assembled on three pieces of white bread with slices of American and Swiss cheese in between the turkey and ham, the top half was like a BLT with ham, turkey and cheeses down below. The bacon was freshly cooked and the helping of sliced ham was generous but the Clubhouse was again no more than the sum of its parts.

The Rainbow Rueben (\$8.95), however, achieved some distinction. While not staggering, it came together better than anything

else I tried at the Kaboose. Between ideally, ever-so-slightly toasted rye bread were swirls of gooey, melted cheese, acidic sauerkraut and salty beef. And although there wasn't much pastrami — two thick, flat slices — the tastes approached a rousing balance.

For the most part, though, the offerings at the Loose Kaboose were more bluntly satiating than surprising. Imagine a no-frills, greasy spoon American diner with plain recipes and ingredients — and you're there. At the Loose Kaboose you're unlikely to taste or try anything you haven't before. It's like the back of your hand. But the value is square and the portions unimpeachable.

The Loose Kaboose is more than just unpretentious; it doesn't even know the meaning of the word. Like its namesake, the diner is hardly leading the way. It has no desire to. Instead, it ambles along contently, at the end of the line, even if at times appearing a little goofy. In that dining car is a world where a leaf of lettuce still qualifies as garnish. But don't take that as a dig. The Loose Kaboose is an oft-forgotten but oddly familiar character. One who, despite its lagging, still has a place.

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## mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

### COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • [mouth@coastweekend.com](mailto:mouth@coastweekend.com)

#### Loose Kaboose

Rating: ★★✶

4514 Pacific Way, Long Beach, WA  
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**HOURS:** Noon to 8 p.m. Monday to Wednesday, and 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday to Sunday.

**PRICE:** \$ — Entrées in the neighborhood of \$10

**SERVICE:** Unpretentious and mild. Dine-in, take-out and limited delivery.

**VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS:** Not recommended.

**DRINKS:** Soda, coffee, tea, milk and juice.

#### KEY TO RATINGS

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