

The Coney is a Party for the Working Class

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September 11, 2023



Photo by Lavender Morin

When you show up at the coney, expect more than just a meal. Since the first Coney Island¹ opened in 1917 and operated above a speakeasy downtown, Detroit's working class has grown their reputation into a staple of food culture. The demand from local factory workers to have fast and affordable food options quickly made coney a regional icon. Today, this culture has shifted slightly, but the vitality remains the same. City residents, plant workers, club-goers and the like flock to coney for quick, consistent meals 24 hours a day while embodying the essence of what makes this city special—the abandonment of expectation, and the freedom of potential. It goes without saying that a coney trip is a post-function necessity.



Photo by Lavender Morin

The 24-hour coney welcomes you with a distinct combination of longevity and uncanny familiarity that fosters endless possibilities. This is partially due to the decor, which varies from Greek murals and wood paneling to framed portraits of Michelle Obama next to antique dolls. It's also due to the music perpetually bumping from cars in the drive-thru, the infinite menu selections, and the occasional security check for weapons at the door. Regardless of the particular optics, each coney feels as though you are stepping into a portal lost in time, an illuminated sanctuary in a city that runs along the outer limits of access—access to quality food², gainful employment³, or reliable mass transit⁴. The sheer lack of full-service grocery stores open late within city limits pushes hungry Detroiters to seek other options, and what better solution than the perpetual party at the local coney island?

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Photos by Jon-Mikal Bartee



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Of course, the workforce of these establishments are what keeps the spirit alive. Workers at Lafayette downtown quickly bellow your order across the restaurant and carry upwards of a dozen plates at a time. Lucky customers at Duly's may be serenaded at 2 a.m. by a server with a folk song played on the çifteli, a traditional Albanian string instrument. If you stop by often enough, waitstaff at Detroit 1 Coney Island will have your usual order ready by the time you sit down. A car may crash through the front of Grandy's, but not to worry; workers will keep the drive-thru moving (and they'll never get an order wrong).



Photo by Jon-Mikal Bartee



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This ethos goes both ways. When I was a waitress at Island Coney on Grosse Ile, my best customers were local construction workers—they ate fast, tipped well, and always showed courtesy, and occasionally even their rowdy side. This made me realize the understanding between the restaurant workers and their patrons that simply doesn't exist in fine dining establishments—solidarity and respect in a relaxed environment that isn't a bar, where people can socialize and let loose. Which specific coney you frequent at the end of the night is dictated by your geography, but whether you're rolling up to Zorba's or L. George's, each trip to the coney speaks to the intimate relationship between the city and its residents.



Photo by Lavender Morin

All of this is to say, Detroit coneys just do it differently. Despite their ties to the Brooklyn beachfront neighborhood (the name was inspired by the flagship Nathan's location), coney culture remains a cherished recession-proof local tradition. So bless 24 hour Coney Islands, bless the 20-minute waits in the drive-thru, bless the staff, bless the working class, and bless Detroit.

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