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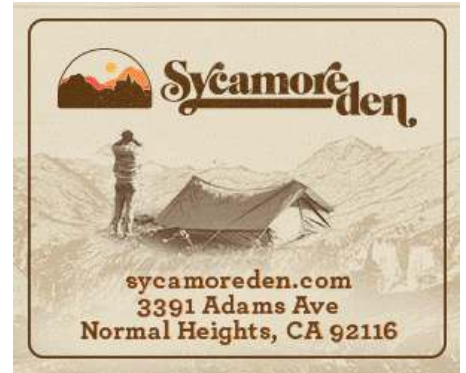
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Friday, Jan 16, 2015

Pillbox Tavern feels casual yet polished

Solana Beach hangout excels at wings and American classics

By Jenny Montgomery



The Pillbox Plate - Photo by Jenny Montgomery

I love the beach as much as the next SoCal native, and I yearn for the day I can move just a little closer to the sand. But if I hear "Margaritaville" one more time, I'm going to stick my own head in a blender to see what it will render. We get it: You want to go on vacation. And when I sat down at Pillbox Tavern in Solana Beach and realized that its big screens were blasting a never-ending loop of sun-and-sand, bro-country videos, I almost bolted. But this easy beach hangout won me over with accessible, filling fare.

Pillbox (117 W. Plaza St.), named for the surf break a few steps to the west of its front door, is a pretty small place for such a swanky zip code. It calls itself retro and modern (does that even mean anything?), which I suppose is not a bad way to encapsulate its fun, youthful vibe, as well as its familiar menu items and neighborhood feel.

I've never been one to appreciate wings, probably because I've eaten too many lousy ones. A flaccid pile of skin and bones never held much appeal. But Pillbox is helping me get over my prejudice. Check out a few of the dry rubs (lemon pepper or Old Bay), but the traditional sauces range from sweet to scorching. The now-requisite Sriracha wings are on hand, but I went with the house barbecue sauce. I tore into the saucy skin and hefty wing with abandon, thrilled to find plenty more than just a few anemic bites of meat. The barbecue sauce isn't going to win any contests, but it's sweet and sticky and has a hint of tang that keeps you

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Hearty American classics make up the rest of the menu, with trendy twists like fried pickles and tater tots to seaside classics (coconut shrimp, anyone?). I had a hard time deciding between the delectable-sounding seafood po boy, featuring fried shrimp and mahi mahi, and the Pillbox Plate.

For whatever reason, I was missing Hawaii, so I opted for the closest thing I could get to a plate lunch from the islands. Taken apart, there's nothing terribly special about the Pillbox Plate. But the sum of its parts adds up to a feeling of comfort and relaxation. Teriyaki chicken, mac salad and coconut-jalapeño rice make for the kind of lunch that made me almost want to sing, "It's 5 o'clock somewhere" without rolling my eyes.

Pillbox Tavern occupies an enviable location, just a few steps away from Fletcher Cove, with a family-friendly playground right at the top, if you've got little ones with you.

For as much coastline as our county has, it's not as easy as you would expect to find quality places to eat that are within shouting distance of crashing waves. Pillbox nails the comfortable energy you expect from a beach restaurant, without the deep-fried, sticky-floored tourist vibe that's far too easy to stumble upon. If you give me one of its root beer floats, I might even hum a little Jimmy Buffett to myself.

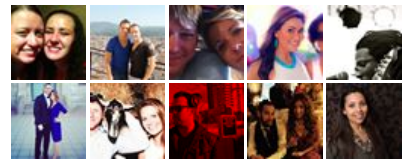
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