



## All American Grill - Restaurant Review



### All American Grill

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7510 Hazard Center Drive Suite 215, San Diego, CA 92108

#### **Restaurant Review**

#### **A Tasty Helping of Pride on Every Plate**

By *Janelle Eckardt*

Protected by hills and surrounded by a concrete jungle of onramps, off ramps, and thoroughfares, Mission Valley is in many ways the pulsing heart of San Diego. Two grand scale shopping centers and a number of smaller complexes accommodate the city's itch to stimulate the economy, while Qualcomm Stadium acts as the home-away-from-home for sports fanatics and concert goers throughout the year. Hidden in plain sight of all this motion and commotion is All American Grill, in Hazard Center. Discretely tucked on the upper level of the popular shopping center, All American Grill enjoys a vast vantage point that encompasses the neighboring trolley line and hillsides. And from its high perch, this grassroots eatery serves up a similarly expansive panorama of homegrown favorites.

My company and I pass through the entrance's red-trimmed turnstile door and are greeted by a fine display of San Diego-centric sports memorabilia. Looking up from the display case, I realize just how large the interior of the restaurant actually is. The dining space is split into two levels: a gradually sloping ramp leads to the raised dining platform that offers table and banquette-style seating, from which steps lead down to the pentagon-sided bar area and outdoor patio. The use of light wood tones and black trim sets a decidedly modern tone that is anchored by a massive stainless steel-canopied aisle way running down the center of the space reminiscent of a sports hall of fame entrance. The walls showcase massive sepia-toned images of our country's heritage on a series of connected panels that provide poignant focal points without being distracting. Similarly, overtly patriotic design elements are kept to a strict minimum, stealthily incorporating reds, blues, and whites as accent colors that do not undermine the sophistication of the room.

Before we commence with the delightfully arduous task of choosing dishes from the dinner menu, we commit to our drink selections for the evening. My guest picks the Pomegranate Lemonade from the fresh fruit juice-infused cocktail menu, and I gravitate toward the Rutherford Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon. The wine is rich and full-bodied, while maintaining an unassuming presence that does not threaten to overshadow or manipulate the flavors of our meal. The lemonade – boasting Skyy Citrus Vodka and dashes of flavored liqueurs mixed with fresh pomegranate juice and lemonade – is refreshingly tangy and bold without delivering too hard a punch.

In an effort to experience our country's cuisine from sea to shining sea, we start the meal off with two very different yet equally satisfying appetizers: the Maryland and the Berkley. The Maryland boasts two crisply breaded crab cakes beside a light salad of mixed greens. Punctuating the dish are artful designs of a sun-dried tomato aioli and a wickedly seductive bacon vinaigrette. Cutting into the crab cake reveals a lusciously smooth and moist filling of fresh and fragrant crabmeat contained within an expertly breaded shell of subtle texture and sweetness. Not muddled by the unnecessary addition of breading or other fillers to the mix, the crabmeat stands alone brilliantly and offers an aromatic glimpse into the sea. The salad of baby spinach, radicchio, arugula, and endive crunches with peppery and bitter notes that marry nicely with the faintly savory bacon dressing. The delicate tomato aioli balances the savory with the sweet and adds a welcome hint of acidity to the bite.

Embodying the Bay Area's enthusiasm for healthful fulfillment, the Berkley is a meal of an appetizer that is suited for the vegetarian and meat-lover alike. An immense Portobello mushroom is presented in all its meaty glory, sliced and fanned across the plate to resemble an oyster shell. Tucked beneath this shell like a cloistered pearl is an invigorating salad of warm spinach, sun-dried tomatoes, and goat cheese lightly dressed in a thyme vinaigrette. I am impressed by the smooth texture and satisfying substance of the mushroom, which is filling like meat protein without being heavy in the stomach. The slightly acidic vinaigrette sprinkled over top enhances the earthy quality of the mushroom and cleanses the palate, while the sun-dried tomato contributes a bit of aromatic sweetness to the combination. To round it all out into one cohesive sensory experience, the crumbled goat cheese is slightly salty and richly textured.

The entrée selection of the menu is a roadmap of the land; as an excursion to the Wild West, we enthusiastically order the Homestead: Wyoming buffalo meatloaf wrapped in bacon. Served with corn mashed potatoes and roasted red pepper gravy, this dish is instantly recognizable as a childhood favorite, yet completely innovative in its execution. Our always informative and attentive server, Tony, explains that buffalo meat is much leaner than beef and the bacon encasement infuses a certain smoky richness into the loaf. We gaze upon the plate before us in giddy wonder; the large loaf is completely covered by a crisp layer of bacon, and is joined by a generous helping of creamy mashed potatoes and crisp green beans. The meatloaf itself (like the crab cake) is happily void of fillers, and offers a more intensely meaty flavor that is not tempered by the overpowering presence of marbling. Combined with the bacon, it is smoky, toothsome, and reminiscent of ground steak. The mashed potatoes, coupled by the subtle depth of the gravy, are lusciously smooth and contrast nicely with the garden-fresh crispness of the green beans.

The Pismo Beach is an ode to the Pacific, and a tasty one at that. Clams are steamed with garlic, white wine, and vine tomatoes, and then tossed in linguine. Served in a large-rimmed bowl, the dish is both rustic and refreshingly simple. We scoop the clams from their open shells and twirl them around large forkfuls of pasta; the result is a surprisingly vibrant bite that highlights the clams' salty sea essence beside the alluring baseline of the garlic and buttery notes of the wine. The red of the tomatoes contrasts stunningly with the similar tones of the pasta and clams, and interjects a nice touch of texture and acidity to the dish. Accompanying the pasta is a large piece of toasted bread that acts as a forth utensil, sopping up the remaining wine sauce from the bottom of the bowl for a few more luxuriously hands-on bites.

While I can only guess, and giggle, about the significance of our next dish's name, the Capital Hill is a substantial double cut pork chop that has been both brined and grilled to expose its layers of flavor. The pork chop is presented simply and exquisitely, with its long bone almost spanning the width of the plate. Roasted fingerling potatoes and green beans rest beside the chop that is topped with a grain mustard-tart apple jus. The meat is thick, juicy to the cut, and expertly pink in the center. Each bite releases a myriad of savory flavor notes that seem to mature and compound as we eat. The salty brine is immediately evident, and then gives way to the spicy sweet hint of the apple. The warm starchiness of the potatoes and sweet crunchiness of the beans are a nice counterbalance to the savory meat.

One might assume we'd take our queue from all the great American Westerns and head out toward the sunset at this point of the meal; well, one would assume wrong. Inspired by the dishes we tried and encouraged by the sweet reading dessert menu, we can't resist ordering two last treats. The Farm House Favorite is my new favorite, serving up all the flavor and richness of a proper dessert sans the bogged down feeling that usually follows. Chilled panna cotta topped with house-made fruit jam is positioned as the center of a blooming flower designed with fruit syrup on the plate. At the base of the flower's stem is a petite cinnamon doughnut hole. The decadent silky texture of the panna cotta is made even more lavish by the tart sweetness of the jam and the warm, fried pastry keeps the dish, and me, from floating away.

The San Ysidro is a scrumptious nod to our South-of-the-Border influences, putting a Latin spin on the cheesecake with dulce de leche swirls and a caramel drizzle. The caramelized, almost maple syrup essence of the smooth cheese filling is eased by the classic graham cracker crust, and the caramel sauce fills the mouth with luscious texture. After indulging on a few too many bites of this intoxicatingly lush dessert, we put our spoons down and smile. At last, we are content.

All American Grill brings fine dining back to a comforting and satisfying level, where familiar sights and flavors invite new feelings and memories. Right at home in a city, and country, that has a fierce appreciation for quality and quantity, All American Grill plates a healthy helping of both with each dish it serves.

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