



Creative female chefs taking local kitchens to new heights

By Amy Roberts 10:57 A.M.APRIL 15, 2015



Some talented ladies are making their marks at several popular San Diego eateries. Here are a few:

SHELLY VELEZ AT PILLBOX TAVERN AND GRILL

Pillbox Tavern in Solana Beach serves up fresh, coastal Americana cuisine in a casual, neighborhood setting. Its elevated bar menu includes burgers, sandwiches, savory wings and salads that are only made with fresh ingredients for a real coastal flavor.

No one is prouder of Pillbox Tavern's eclectic menu than Executive Chef Shelly Velez. She was instrumental in creating the menu and in developing standout offers such as the shrimp and mahi citrus ceviche, and the coconut shrimp.

“Our homemade cuisine is simple and made-to-order with quality ingredients,” Velez noted. “That is what makes Pillbox’s food stand out. Some things will have a slight spin on American classics, but our menu is true to flavor and is delicious.”

Velez noted the success of the establishment’s house-made sauces as a complement to its flavorful menu offerings.

“Even though my cuisine stands alone with great flavor and presentation, you can’t go wrong with a delicious hand-packed burger topped with a bold special sauce,” she said.

Pillbox Tavern offers specials throughout the week. For news on these specials and for more information on its menu, visit pillboxtavern.com, and follow the tavern on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

CHRISTINA PANCHERI AT TAVERN

Christina Pancheri is another successful female chef proud to be taking the lead at a local hotspot, Tavern on Garnet Avenue in Pacific Beach. Pancheri, a graduate of the Art Institute of San Diego, joined Tavern’s staff in February 2014 on the very same day she was brought in to do a tasting and has never looked back.

“I think it was meant to be,” she said. “And getting to join the team right after that tasting confirmed that.”

Pancheri is enthusiastic about Tavern's German coastal menu featuring a variety of house-made pretzel dishes served with house-crafted mustards.

“Our foundation is baking fresh-baked pretzels, pretzel buns, pretzel Texas-style toast, pretzel-based doughnuts, and anything else that we can think of doing with a pretzel,” she said.

Adding a coastal flair to the German-based offerings allows Pancheri to showcase her passion for fresh produce, local meats, sustainable seafood and quality ingredients.

“I truly enjoy working with flavors both known and cherished by Southern Californians and chefs alike,” Pancheri said.

For more information about Tavern, visit tavernatthebeach.com.

LETICIA “LETY” GONZALEZ AT UPTOWN TAVERN

Leticia “Lety” Gonzalez may have started at Hillcrest’s Uptown Tavern in January 2013 as a line cook, but she knew hard work could pay dividends.

“Although it was recognized I was a hard worker, I still went above and beyond to do what I could to prove that I wasn't just another girl in the kitchen,” Gonzalez said.

In March, Gonzalez’s diligence paid off when she was named executive chef at Uptown. She marked her debut by rolling out a new menu reflecting the standards she set for herself over the years.

Her favorite dishes include the seafood pasta made with a firecracker garlic fusilli and fresh seafood from a local purveyor. The Western burger features a Karl Strauss Tower Ten braised pulled pork, an Angus patty and Adabbers habanero pickles. Gonzalez’s ahi poke adds peppers and avocado along with a house-made sesame oil dressing to give a non-traditional flair to a traditional favorite.

“I try to use local ingredients, and I mean local,” Gonzalez said. “Our brunch frittata means I’m going out to the farmers markets to see what our local farmers have in season.”

Her popular brunch menu at Uptown offers something for everyone, including a red velvet battered pork belly.

“It’s like carnival food,” said Gonzalez, who sees the Uptown kitchen as an art studio, rather than a job. “It’s sweet, savory and in-your-face delicious.”

Visit Uptown Tavern at 1236 University Ave. to sample Gonzalez’s artful and tasty creations or visit uptowntavernsd.com to learn more.