

Restaurant Review – Stillwater – Dana Point

TGIF!!! Hopefully I've caught you as you are making plans about what to do with your weekend. If you're one of the sort that prefers not plan that far ahead then I hope to turn your ear as you make plans for the evening's festivities because I have a great place for you with this our first Chow NCOIC Restaurant Review!

Just down Del Prado from iconic local surf shop Killerdana and cater-cornered to Best Friend's Art Gallery, home to a few remaining members of last year's Elephant Parade sits Stillwater Spirits and Sounds.

The wife and I recently visited in that odd hour in the restaurant industry on the cusp of dinner when lunch is just ending and dinner prep hasn't yet been completed. The menu was somewhat limited due to the timing of our arrival but the easy charm of the staff and shaded outdoor seating area made the place just feel right.

I was immediately sold on the Prohibition era décor that is purposefully reminiscent of the speakeasies of that time. In fact most everything here is geared toward creating a very genuine and authentic speakeasy experience (minus the constant paranoia of the place being raided by G-men, of course).

Like all the great watering holes and gin joints of those highly romanticized days Stillwater has a magnificent spirits program. Their signature cocktails are inspired by popular libations of the 20's, 30's, and 40's and when possible are made with ingredients favored by mixologists of that era.

Speakeasy style establishments have become popular recently as they tend to offer a VIP experience. Still Water however offers the same inclination toward quality and atmosphere while not requiring a reservation or a hipster persona.

That an establishment of this genre should find a home here in sunny Dana Point is no coincidence. You see, long before the Beach Boys laid claim to nearby Doheny Beach, back when author Richard Henry Dana, Jr. debarked the *Pilgrim* (before he lent his name to the area), Dana Point Harbor was called Stillwater Bay.

In its earliest days Stillwater Bay was home to peaceful natives. That all went to pot however when pirate Hippolyte Bouchard raided nearby Mission San Juan Capistrano. The place hasn't been the same since.

That same spirit of danger and defiance made a comeback in the turbulent 1920's and 30's. With Prohibition in full effect the harbor became a haven for bootleggers running hooch up the California Coast.

It is in this image that Stillwater Spirits and Sounds casts itself. And it's not just the cocktails that'll take you back here, but the musical acts that take their stage as well. The Roaring 20's were a time of unprecedented experimentation in American music. Many of the styles we best recognize today lie rooted in this period. Stillwater pays homage to this spirit of innovation by opening their stage to 21st century musical acts in the genres of Folk, Rock, Blues, and Electro Swing with many representing an eclectic melding of all four of those styles.

More important to a restaurant review than entertainment options or the availability of premium spirits however is what's on the menu, and once again Stillwater does not disappoint.

As I mentioned, their pickins' were slim due to the hour at which we had arrived although they did offer that if we wanted to wait 15 minutes to order while they fire up their outdoor pizza oven (which is crafted from a copper still and definitely stands out as the establishment's defining landmark) we could order their signature Red Oak Flatbreads.

Being as hungry as we were from having woken late and not eaten anything all day we opted to pass and go for what was available more immediately. For her it took the shape of the Market Fish and Chips which consisted of delicate cod filets encased in a chili tempura over a bed of broad French fries cut in house. It was served with a "loaded" tartar sauce which had a nice citrusy zest which was a nice complement to the chili tempura.

As for myself, I was instantly drawn (as I usually always am) to the mention of chicken and waffles on the menu. For reasons I cannot understand other than that it is indeed a delicious and time honored favorite I LOVE chicken and waffles. Stillwater it seemed had done me one better by offering up a handheld version of my old fav as a chicken and waffle sandwich.

I must say that while I found it a creative take on classic home cooking and though I ate every bite delightedly, that it was not quite what I had expected and I'm still not sure if that's a good thing. Perhaps I'll have to have another to decide. Whatever the verdict may be though one thing is for certain. The chicken and waffle sandwich contains arugula, shaved, apple, and a honey-mustard aioli. If you are a chicken and waffles traditionalist like myself, you long for the thick hearty richness of syrup or at the very least a rich aroma of maple within the batter itself. Unfortunately this sandwich didn't offer either of those things and was instead a bit like a whole brunch taken to go.

Aside from that however I had a great time at Stillwater and the Killer Bee cocktail (which walks the line between sweet and heat) that I had with my meal helped to round out what I thought to be a very enjoyable experience

We did not stick around that Saturday to catch the evening's musical performers but that doesn't mean that you have to make your visit to Stillwater as fleetingly brief as mine seemed to be. They have live acts pretty much any day of the week. This weekend's musical performers include.

Friday 18th at 9:00pm: The Hula Girls wow the crowd with a blend of rockabilly, hulabilly, swing, jazz, and Hawaiian tunes.

Saturday 19th at 9:00pm: Hunter & The Dirty Jacks perform a mix of blues and roots rock that is described as "vintage sound with a modern edge".

Sunday 20th 4:00pm: Blue Medicine will take the stage at 4:00 with their funky, rocking blues music

I encourage you to make the short trip from wherever you are to beautiful Dana Point and drink in the majestic views of the Pacific Ocean that the area presents. If you get thirsty or need a bite to eat in Dana Point, I encourage you to check out Stillwater.

While you're there don't forget to ask about their Secret Knock Club. Membership gives you access to featured events and specials.

We'd love to hear from anyone who has been to Stillwater or pays them a visit due to this review about your experiences there.