

Old Town welcomes Oculito 477, Pho Royal closes in North Park



A speakeasy will soon operate behind this Old Town bar. (Courtesy of Tahona Bar)

By Frank Sabatini Jr.

Pho Royal in North Park has permanently closed. The address went dark right after it was tented for termites in December 2018.

A family member from the ownership indicated it wasn't financially feasible to continue running it, but added that Pho Royal's second location in Lemon Grove (*6937 Federal*

Blvd.) will remain in operation. A different lease-holder will move into the space in January with a Cajun-style seafood eatery called **Shrimp Heads**. *2832 El Cajon Blvd.*

Old Town's new mezcal-centric **Tahona Bar** will encroach on an existing storage space behind the bar to create a candle-filled speakeasy named **Oculto 477**. Co-owner Steven Sadri said it will open in late February or early March, and that design details are still in the works. He added that a door for customers to enter into the intimate confines has yet to be created. *2414 San Diego Ave., 619-255-2090, tahonabar.com.*

Hillcrest recently became home to a second location of **Natural Style Chicken**, which opened its primary restaurant at *3944 W. Point Loma Blvd.* in 1979. Famous for its rotisserie birds, which are sold in whole, half or quarter portions, the new branch took over the former **Tokyo Ramen**.



Natural Style Chicken has come to the heart of Hillcrest. *(Alternative Strategies)*

The menu also features ribs, chicken egg rolls and house-made sides such as potato salad, onion rings and refried beans. In addition, turkey and duck can be pre-ordered for parties or dinners to go. *501 University Ave., 619-542-9844.*

Restaurateur Chris McAfee explained to us that he recently closed his **Smok'd Hog** barbecue eatery in Hillcrest for a move to **Vail Headquarters** in Temecula, where he will share a 6,000-square-foot commercial space with three other food venues. He will also gain a full liquor license.



This house-cured bacon will land in breakfast sandwiches when The Smok'd Hog moves to Temecula. *(Photo by Chris McAfee)*

“It was an opportunity I had to jump at,” said McAfee, who started the business as **The Whole Hog** four years ago at the triangular intersection of Park Boulevard and Robinson and Indiana streets.

He plans on reopening at the new location by late February. He said a larger kitchen will allow him to introduce breakfast sandwiches and sell more smoked meats by the pound. 32127 Temecula Parkway, thesmokdhog.com.

Chicken wings and tenders rule the day at **The Blazzin Buffalo**, a fast-casual eatery that recently opened across the street from **Bronx Pizza** in Hillcrest.

Owner Fahad Ibadi brings to the operation many years of experience making wings. He was longtime co-owner of **Legends Wings** in National City and worked in eateries that served wings before that.



A new place for chicken wings has flapped into Hillcrest. *(Courtesy of The Blazzin Buffalo)*

His menu offers 14 different sauce options, plus grilled chicken and shrimp that lands in salads, sandwiches and wraps. There's also french fries topped with Buffalo-style chicken or pulled pork, which is slow-roasted onsite for five hours. By later this month, he plans on introducing several vegan options, such as mock chicken wings and breaded cauliflower in Buffalo sauce. *120 Washington St., 619-542-9848, blazzinbuffalo.com.*

San Diego will likely become home to an establishment boasting the largest commercial whiskey collection in the world when reps from Guinness World Records conduct an inventory count at **The Whiskey House**, located just outside the Gaslamp Quarter. Exceeding the collection of whiskeys at the **Aero Club** in Middletown, which offers several hundred labels, The Whiskey House greets customers with 2,800 choices from all over the globe. The tally by Guinness is scheduled to conclude Jan. 15.



A world record may be set for a San Diego whiskey bar. (*Alternative Strategies*)

Co-owner Alex Minaev and business partner, Ryan King, started out with a mere 200 bottles when they opened the bar/restaurant four years ago. Minaev attributes the growing trend in whiskey drinking to the massive collection, which includes Scotch whiskeys that are more than 40 years old.

Potential contenders for the world record are Jack Rose Dining Saloon in Washington, D.C., and a hotel in Sweden. But unless they quickly beef up their commercial inventories and register them with the organization, The Whiskey House takes the title. *420 Third Ave., 619-546-6289,*
thewhiskeyhousesd.com.