

Little-known airport eatery best place for breakfast in Half Moon Bay

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Locals know that the best breakfast on the coast is in an airplane terminal -- no tickets required.

For decades, the 3-Zero Cafe has been the best-kept secret in Half Moon Bay. Most drivers pass the drab-looking terminal building on Highway 1 without a second thought. The sign at the airport entrance just says "Coffee Shop."

But inside the building is a dining room that looks like an airplane fanatic's fevered dream. Diners sit among photos, posters and newspaper clippings of World War II-era airplanes. They gaze up at model airplanes, suspended in midair. On one wall, puzzles of airplanes; on another, airplane needlepoints.

And if that isn't enough, they can look out the window and see the real thing as pilots angle small propeller planes onto the tarmac.

"You can usually see people flying in, coming to eat and leaving again. The atmosphere is unique. It's wonderful," declared Mary Ann Bunyan, of Moss Beach, who has been eating breakfast here for 50 years. Back then, the place was known as Annabelle's Kitchen, and Annabelle Bettencourt could be found flipping burgers with a cigarette pressed between her lips.

The name 3-Zero Cafe refers to a little-known airport convention, in which all runways are labeled by magnetic compass headings. The cafe sits at 300 degrees, which is abbreviated to the 3-Zero Cafe.

The airplane decor came after 1994, when Joe Gore bought the place and went into business with his partner, Mark

Smith. Both men had worked together for years at San Carlos Airport, operating a flying school and Cessna dealership. Gore was also contract airport manager in Half Moon Bay.

At the time, the cafe consisted of a counter and four tables.

But the county expanded the building, along with the office next door. Now the dining room has expanded to 1,000 square feet with spillover seating to outdoor picnic tables, where diners can smell the jet fuel and have a true airport experience.

"I really love to be at the airport. I'm an airport bum," Smith said. "I'd be here anyway, so it's worked out good for me."

Both men are accidental restaurateurs, so they are rather proud that the place's biggest fans swear by its food and not the decor.

The 3-Zero Cafe is known to overflow on weekends. It has 110 reviews and a four-star rating on Yelp, where reviewers swear by dishes like the crab cake Benedict and brioche French toast. The menu also includes an "OJ waffle" made with orange zest and a "bacon waffle" with bacon bits.

Smith is known as a cutup, amusing diners with his killer impression of Rodney Dangerfield. Gore also owns and manages the Flying Fish Grill, a downtown Half Moon Bay restaurant known

for its Baja-style fish tacos.

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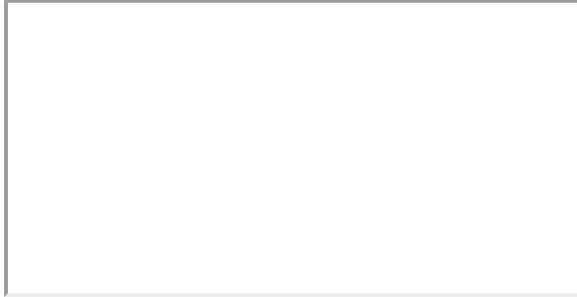
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"The difference between aviation and restaurants is no one is dying in the restaurant business," said Gore, a former Air Force pilot.

But Smith has witnessed plenty of airport accidents while on restaurant duty. He once helped rescue three people from an airplane that was blown off-course while landing on the tarmac and crash-landed on the other side of the airport.

"I had my phone in one hand and a spatula in the other, and my apron blowing up around my head," he recalls with a laugh. The passengers survived with minimal injuries.

Contact Julia Scott at 650-348-4340.

What: 3-Zero Cafe

Where: 9850 Cabrillo Highway North at Half Moon Bay Airport

Contact: 650-728-1411

Aiming high: Bordy O'Brien, 3, of Half Moon Bay, plays with a model airplane. "You can usually see people flying in, coming to eat and leaving again," says cafe regular Mary Ann Bunyan.

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