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PILOT GETAWAYS

exas pilots know of a place where good old-fashioned hospitality is served up along with a healthy slice of Americana. The rather nondescript exterior of the FBO and Southern Flyer Diner at Brenham, Texas, belies the 1950s atmosphere inside. Upon entering, "poodle girls" clad in classic poodle skirts and bobby socks will escort you to your table, right past the jukebox that might have tunes of Elvis. You'll find juicy hamburgers, apple pie, and real malts, made the way they're supposed to be.

The Southern Flyer Diner - A slice of Americana in Texas

By JOHN T. KOUNIS. PHOTOS BY GEORGE A. KOUNIS

Brenham Municipal Airport (11R) is 55 nautical miles west-northwest of George Bush International/Houston Airport (IAH). The Houston Class B extends to within 25 nm of Brenham. You can stay under the Class B floor by flying below 2,000 feet msl north of North Houston Business Airport (9X1) or below 3,000 feet msl south of Houston-Southwest Airport (AXH). Don't fly too low around the south side of the Class B, however, since very tall radio antennas north of AXH extend up to 2,049 feet msl. Approaches from other directions are



Brenham Municipal Airport (11R) is 55 nautical miles west-northwest of George Bush

straightforward.

International/Houston Airport (IAH).

On your way in, listen for weather on AWOS 121.125 MHz. Brenham has a single 6,003-foot by 75-foot Runway 16/34, with left traffic for both runways; Runway 16 is the calm wind runway. Watch for jets making long straight-ins on the VOR/DME approach to Runway 16. IFR aircraft usually make a blind call on CTAF 123.075 MHz when passing the final approach fix (Heare) on a 4.7-nm final at 2,000 feet msl. Transient tiedowns are on the ramp at midfield, east of the runway.

The Southern Flyer Diner and FBO are in the building at the south end of the ramp. Rental cars and a courtesy car for use up to two hours are available, as well as full-serve 100LL and Jet A, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. (until 7 p.m. in summer). Self-serve 100LL is available 24 hours.

History



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When Janet and Jack Hess took over management of the airport at Brenham in 2000, they wanted to augment their line services with a restaurant. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, slowed their plans, but they pressed on and opened the restaurant on Oct. 12, 2002. "The locals didn't know if I was a carpetbagger or just crazy," Jack says. "Now they just think I'm crazy." Janet and Jack are both pilots and wanted to create a pilot-friendly atmosphere for the restaurant. When deciding between a 1940s World War II theme and a 1950s diner, they felt that a 1950s diner would have a wider appeal to both pilots and nonpilots. They must have been right, since the clientele is 50-percent pilots and 50-percent nonpilots.

Rather than decorate the restaurant with "a bunch of stuff on the walls," they decided to splurge on high-quality uniforms instead. The "poodle girls" wear red, blue, or pink poodle skirts, black-and-white

saddle oxfords, and white blouses with a poodle embroidered on them. Most of the poodle girls are local high school girls in their first job. They are full of energy, and they all agree that the Southern Flyer is a fun place to work. Even after the girls go off to college, they often come back to visit and sometimes even to work. It has become a tradition for the old poodles to come back to work Prom Night to give the high school poodles the day off. Today, the Southern Flyer enjoys great community relations, and local residents support the airport.

The Southern Flyer Diner

Once you enter the building, the FBO service counter is on the right, and the restaurant entrance is to the left. The main dining room has a black-and-white checkered tile floor, tables, a few cozy booths, and, of course, a jukebox. Neon signs decorate the walls. A large old-fashioned malt machine is in one corner, as the restaurant is known for superb ice cream shakes and malts. You'll enjoy good views of the runway if you sit on the expansive shaded deck out back. You may even spot turtles sunning themselves on the shores of a 250-yard-long pond that the poodle girls refer to as "Lake Brenham."

Traditional American food is the fare here. A note on the menu states that all "frying is done in ZERO trans-fat Canola Oil, so... Go For It!" and so we did. For an appetizer, the Brenham Wings, a twist on Buffalo wings, are a good choice. They're made with boneless all white meat (chicken breast), and are served up with just a light coating of spicy—and secret—sauce to keep them crispy. An extra helping of sauce comes on the side, \$9.

The thick burgers are made with about a half-pound of ground beef and, according to Jack, "a seasoning that makes a whole lot of difference." He won't tell us what kind of seasoning it is, but it's good enough to bring in pilots from far and wide. In fact, a group recently arrived in a Learjet just for hamburgers; they joked that with the current cost of fuel, they were enjoying the "\$1,000 Hamburger." A traditional cheeseburger with American, Monterey Jack, Swiss, or Cheddar is \$7.70. You can add jalapeños, grilled onions, grilled mushrooms, or bacon, for 75 cents to \$1.25 extra.

Jack heartily recommends the \$8 chicken fried chicken sandwich for lunch. "It's like Chicken Fried Steak, but made with a chicken breast, breaded, and fried," he explains. If you just want traditional chicken fried steak, it is also available for \$8. We ordered the chicken parmigiana sandwich, which arrived with ample spicy tomato sauce, plus a cup of extra sauce on the side. The fried catfish sandwich looked darker than at other restaurants. Jack



The restaurant is an easy walk from the tiedown area.

explains that most fried catfish is made with just cornmeal, but theirs is made with four ingredients that impart a great flavor to the fish (you guessed it... he wouldn't divulge the secret ingredients). The sandwich comes with coleslaw for \$8. Instead of fries, you should consider a plate heaped high with their delicious homemade onion rings for \$4.

Dinners are primarily entrée-sized portions of the lunch items, and can be ordered anytime. The chicken parmigiana is served on a bed of pasta with salad, roll, and one vegetable for \$13. The monterrey chicken is a fried chicken breast with sautéed onions and fresh bell peppers, topped with melted jack cheese, accompanied by Spanish rice, a fried pickle, and a roll for \$12. A California native, I had never seen a fried pickle on a menu; it's fried in a light coating of batter. Smaller, lunch portions of the dinner entrées are \$8 to \$10.

Make sure to leave room for dessert. Daily choices include "rectangular pie"—Southern Flyer's take on classics like apple crumble and pecan pie, served in a manner more conducive to sharing—as well as a choice you probably won't find elsewhere: mocha cola cake. Typically reserved for birthdays, it's a chocolate cake made with Coca Cola and topped with mocha icing. The authentic American malt is made right every time—Jack is a stickler about it. "We don't vary the recipe," Jack says. Malts, shakes, and ice cream sodas are \$4 to \$4.50. All Southern Flyer Diner desserts are made from scratch. According to the menu, "Even our ice cream is made from scratch. We scratch on Blue Bell's door until they open up!"

The restaurant only closes four days per year: New Years Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Just about any other time, you will find the owners on hand, making sure that things run smoothly, Sun. through Thurs., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Fri. and Sat. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., 979/836-5462, www.southernflyer.com.

Conclusion

One customer from Houston flew to the Southern Flyer Diner 162 times a few years back in his Comanche. Jack figures they owe him a few additional menu items to add variety to his diet, but this pilot insists the food is just fine the way it is. After our stop in Brenham, we have to say that we agree.

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF PILOT GETAWAYS MAGAZINE. DETAILS SUCH AS FREQUENCIES AND PRICES HAVE BEEN RECENTLY UPDATED TO REFLECT CURRENT INFORMATION.

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