

# Veggie heaven at Hampden eatery—and the meats and fish aren't bad either

by Lynn Williams  
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At Rocket To Venus, I heard words I never expected to hear spoken in a restaurant: “We’re all sold out of the brussels sprouts.”

That this much-despised vegetable has already achieved iconic, sellout status is a tribute to this pioneering restaurant, which appeared in Hampden last winter seemingly knowing exactly what the neighborhood wanted. If I were of a conspiratorial frame of mind I might suspect alien intelligence...

Rocket to Venus has a great back-story. It pays tribute to the efforts, back in 1928, of three intrepid neighborhood guys to pilot a homemade rocket to Venus. Amazingly, they lived to tell the tale, which can be perused on the restaurant’s menus and website. Their visionary spirits live on in a cool, retro-futuristic dining room, with porthole-shaped window and an aqua-and-black color scheme, a digital jukebox (#2 on the hit parade: Lawrence Welk’s “Baby Elephant Walk”), and a menu that is madly, lovably eclectic.

Old-school bar food—including the shrimp salad sandwich served by Showalter’s, the corner saloon that once occupied this site—rubs shoulders with all sorts of spicy stuff representing a handful of ethnic traditions. (Sitting on the horseshoe-shaped bar, where more traditional bartenders would put the peanuts, are bowls of wasabi peas.)

Vegetarians are amply cared for with such dishes as black-bean “Wimpies,” a tofu sloppy joe, Szechuan noodles and a good old grilled cheese sandwich. And you’ll find dishes here you’ll rarely see elsewhere, such as batter-fried pickles with chipotle ranch sauce, and the aforementioned and improbably popular brussels sprouts, roasted in balsamic vinegar and olive oil. Prices are low enough to tempt diners to experiment.

To begin, we shared a couple of appetizers: pierogies (\$5), which looked like petite versions of the East Baltimore Ukrainian church-lady classics, but packed a surprising punch with their filling of caramelized onion, smoked Gouda and red pepper, and ceviche (\$6). This version of the Spanish perennial featured tender calamari rings in a citrus-and-mango marinade, spilling out of a wonton cup.

Oyster po-boys are not usually a huge favorite of mine; if eaten like a normal sandwich, the bread usually overwhelms the filling. This wasn’t a problem with the Rocket version (\$11). The oysters and prosciutto married beautifully, the tomato was properly August-ripe, the greens were tangy and distinctive, and the tasty, slightly chewy roll let the other flavors shine through.

We also liked the Szechuan noodles, which featured flat rice noodles in a sauce that deftly mixed the sweet and the fiery. Slender threads of carrot, leek and shiitake mushroom added flavor and color interest, and heft was supplied by slabs of fried tofu, with a meaty rather than silky texture.

The only desserts available were from Dangerously Delicious Pies. The pecan was nice, but not nearly dangerous enough for this pie-lovin' Southern gal.

A word to the wise: Rocket to Venus is often crowded during prime dining times. Call for reservations, or go early for the best chance of getting seated immediately. But don't go this week! The kitchen will be closed for vacation through the 25th, although the bar will remain open.

### **Rocket To Venus**

3360 Chestnut Ave.

Hours: Open for dinner 5 p.m.-11 p.m. Mon.-Sat. Sunday: Brunch 12 – 7p.m. Bar 12 -2 a.m.

Phone: 410-235-7887

Our dinner for two: \$42

### **The Latest Dish...**

Remember Brighton's? The InterContinental Harbor Court Hotel's pretty water-view restaurant always played second fiddle to its lavish sibling, Hampton's, but earned its own raves as one of Baltimore's loveliest dining rooms, and a fine place to indulge in tea and scones. However, now that Hampton's has closed, Brighton's has come into its own as the hotel's top-tier restaurant, serving breakfast, lunch, dinner, a Sunday champagne brunch, and afternoon tea on Fridays and Saturdays.

The kitchen, under executive chef Joshua Young, an InterContinental vet from Chicago, specializes in contemporary American cuisine; entrees include cardamom-braised duck with Tuscan couscous and artichoke-crusting wild Atlantic salmon.