

OMNIVORE | Rocket to Venus



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Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids

Rocket to Venus

by [Richard Gorelick](#)

COZY AND SLICK, AUSTERE BUT FRIENDLY, Rocket to Venus (3360 Chestnut Ave., [410] 235-7887), Hampden's new restaurant, corner bar, and gathering space, excels most at being a fundamentally useful place. It's an instant success, destined for institutional status, the kind of place that will be hard to remember having done without. Its name inspired by the local legend concerning a group of visionary Hampdenites, Rocket to Venus itself is full of mission and vision. It means to be a place where nice neighbors can gather, grab a good meal, and then linger and drink into the night.

At all this it succeeds, with great style. The retro palette and furnishings, nearly all of it handcrafted by owners and friends, go just far enough. Clear spaces and clean lines predominate, and kitsch has been nimbly averted. A space-age jukebox is loaded with recordings from local bands. It's a gorgeous piece of space-age machinery. Rocket to Venus has already changed its smoking policy--none before 9 p.m.--and it felt, on a recent evening, as though the staff had programmed the jukebox to supply the dining room with appropriate music during peak dinner hours.

Such thoughtfulness all around, and a staff gifted with empathy and peripheral vision. That they look, at first glance, like sullen rock stars, and turn out to be sweet puppies, is not incidental. Because here, in this problematic neighborhood, the secret to breaking down barriers of class and age and aspiration is revealed: never condescend, always care deeply.

The low-priced menu offers diners choices ranging from a grilled cheese sandwich (\$5) to steak frites (\$16) with plenty of appealing options in between. Vegetarians are thoroughly considered with appetizers,

soups, salads, and entrées--among them, pierogi (\$3.75), rotini and cheese (\$5), potato-leek soup (\$4), Brussels sprouts (\$4), veggie wimpies (\$7), a "Sloppy Jo-fu" sandwich (\$6), Szechwan noodles (\$8), and a walnut-and-sage pesto entrée (\$14).

Weirdly, it's those Brussels spouts that might become the house's signature dish. Halved, tossed in balsamic vinegar and olive oil, and roasted, they show up in a generous pile, crisp and brown. Done like this, they're for spearing and popping, their full, earthy flavor expanding in the mouth. Pierogi and pork dumplings (\$5) are fried here, and while some diners will find them greasy, others will appreciate the flavor that fat introduces. Plump and comfortingly oozy, the pierogi are filled with caramelized onion, roasted red pepper, and Asiago cheese; the dumplings' mild pork and bacon stuffing are smartly set off by the accompanying jalapeño dipping sauce, the color of wheatgrass.

Good things continue to arrive--cornmeal-fried oysters (\$8) that are plump, crunchy, and juicy; a modest and simple potato-leek soup, with enough pepper to keep it from blandness; a half-pound of perfectly tended steamed shrimp (\$10), garnished with onions and unapologetic ally Old Bay. And a misfire--an overly garnished ceviche (\$7.50) of calamari and salmon, from which all marinade juices have been drained away, making it into more of a seafood salad.

A single entrée disappointed, too--the chicken puttanesca (\$8) is presented in a small bowl that makes it look skimpier than it is, with a sauté of chopped tomatoes that doesn't replace the pleasure of a full-on tomato sauce. But winners dominate--letter-perfect steak frites with a choice of three sauces (teriyaki, red-eye gravy, or smoked paprika beurre blanc) and a mountain of hot fries, the meat pounded out and fired fine; fiery jerk chicken (\$14) with a luscious papaya slaw and crumbly buttermilk biscuit, its skin yielding somewhat more pleasure than the not fully moist meat.

Szechwan noodles (\$8)--mixed with fried tofu triangles, leeks, shiitake mushrooms, and slivered carrots--is a go-to vegan entrée: the rice noodles firm and slithery, the tofu golden and crispy. Served with fries or potato salad, the veggie wimpies (\$7)--four two-ounce black-bean burgers with fried onions, honey mustard, and Swiss cheese--are, just now, the best thing of its kind in Baltimore.

There is, to boot, a well-written wine list and a beer menu that lists drafts, bottles, and cans, including \$2 Natty Bohs. Dangerously Delicious Pies are brought in for dessert, but the thing to get are the homemade "moon pies," which, yes, are essentially kitschy and jokey but also delicious and satisfying.