

Have a blast at this Hampden hot spot

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Vibe: Other than the abandoned remnants of a World's Fair, where else would you expect to find a '60s-style house of the future? In Hampden, naturally. The Atomic Age decor of Rocket to Venus, with its sunburst mirror, robin's egg blue paint, metallic accents and pill-shaped windows, pays homage to the legendary Hampden space program, or so the story on the menu reads. Inside a plain building with simple signage lies a great place to drink or dine. Cheap but tasty food, reasonably-priced drinks and a low-key atmosphere make this a great hangout away from the familiar Avenue.

Crowd: Open the door to R2V and you'll be greeted by a hair-dyed, tattooed, pierced and punk-garbed group. Like its half-sister Holy Frijoles (the two venues share an owner), Hampdenites and hipsters flock to this Chestnut Avenue mothership. The constant din is an indication of the relatively jovial atmosphere -- whether it's coming from a sequestered black leather booth, someone fueling up at the bar or scenesters just milling about. The openness of the space is perfect for mingling, and with lots of seating around its perimeter, there's no shortage of places to gather and converse.

Libations: R2V's wraparound bar serves as the nexus of the joint, fitting for its Atomic Age theme. People gravitate toward the copper-piped bar and stay perched, so have fun trying to squeeze in. Aside from the fully stocked and mirrored liquor display, R2V also sports a modular, metallic tap with eight spouts. The reasonably-priced drinks, served in standard-sized glasses, are good, but not outstanding.

Sounds: With a selection of more than 1,400 CDs, how can you go wrong? A space-aged, touch-screen jukebox wedged into a back corner pumps out beats, and for a couple bucks you can make your own playlist. Spanning multiple genres -- R&B, jazz, indie rock and movie soundtracks, among others -- the jukebox keeps the evening's soundtrack interesting and certainly palatable. Plus, R2V's jukebox is home to an admirable collection of local bands, from the old-school metal of Kix to the more recent rock tunes of The Oranges Band, Lake Trout, Frenemies and Payola Reserve. What's even better than the total awesomeness of the music collection? The volume doesn't get obnoxiously loud 'til about 11 p.m., so you won't blow out your vocal chords trying to have a nice dinner.

Service: The staff is super friendly. For someone not familiar with the Hampden hipster scene, first encounters might be overwhelming, but break into a conversation and you'll see that this mixed bag of local band members, hons and transplants are all sweet (or at least feign interest for tips -- but hey, it's better than being ignored). The wait staff is nice and responsive, and even with every black-and-red-clad barstool taken, the bartenders are very attentive.

Bottom Line: This themed restaurant and bar fits perfectly in Hampden. From the atmosphere and the retro-futuristic feel to its location, things just seem to click. It's got some work to do in drawing a loyal

following with the well-worn bars of the Avenue only blocks away, but with a wealth of assets -- among them, comparable drinks, great food and a hospitable staff -- Rocket is ready for takeoff.

Source: <http://baltimore.metromix.com/>