

Birroteca serves up unique offerings

By Father Leo Patalinghug

Since 2012, Baltimore foodies have gathered beneath the JFX highway in a rustic 1883 stone building to enjoy delectable craft and bottled beers, artisan pizzas, fresh pastas and hearty salads with fresh, locally grown ingredients.

Birroteca is the restaurant at the center of all the attention, taking its name from a whimsical combination of the Italian words “birra” (beer) and “enoteca,” a wine bar. Getting there, your GPS will wind you through some of Hampden’s tight-knit neighborhoods to Birroteca’s conveniently large parking lot. The building offers different styles of dining: a sophisticated white table cloth and candlelit dining area, a large bar section with separate high dining tables, and upstairs dining with a smaller bar for overflow crowds. The energy level is high, and so is the volume of conversation, signifying comfort and enjoyment. Reserve a table in the formal area for quieter conversations.

The retro-vintage charm continues with service provided by young hipsters wearing flannel shirts, jeans and genuine smiles. Despite some timing issues and unannounced change of service staff, it was refreshing to have a vibrant, welcoming and knowledgeable food service experience.

The menu’s impressive variety of beer reflects the restaurant’s name. The limited wine list seems intentional for pairing menu food items.

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I found the restaurant’s self-description of “small” plates to be bigger than expected. The artisanal quality also means slightly higher prices – on average, pastas \$16; salads, \$11; vegetables, \$9 and pizzas, \$15.

Don’t come here looking for a greasy pepperoni pizza. Be open to a pizza with briny soft mussels; or the “pancetta” – porcini mushrooms, pork belly, taleggio cheese, smoked mozzarella and oregano – which packs a salty punch and demands another thirsty round.

The “Duck Duck Goose” – duck confit, slathered fig-onion jam, balsamic reduction, two types of cheese and a duck egg (although mine was overcooked), offered delicious, bold flavors, but needed more balance as sweetness gave a dessert quality to a savory dish.

The pastas were well prepared and reminiscent of rustic Italian flavors. Here it’s served in slightly smaller portions in bigger, fancier bowls. Large salads celebrate alternative greens – locally sourced products such as rapini, pumpkin seeds,

radishes, pea greens, arugula and fennel in playful combinations. Request the dressing on the side to let freshness speak for itself.

The appetizers, salumi (cured meat) and cheese course, “family-style specials” and unique desserts – such as olive oil gelato – merit multiple visits for a full experience. Birroteca’s artisan approach can describe food, but also our life of faith: each of us is unique, individually made from God’s masterful hands. Our call in life is to celebrate our unique charism and share our gifts to feed a hungry world. Dining at Birroteca showed me how quality ingredients, caring service and a festive atmosphere give a common experience of celebrating good food in unique ways.

This restaurant, tucked in a Hampden neighborhood around the corner from St. Thomas Aquinas, reminded me of the simple but flavorful meals from an Italian country kitchen, but served with bigger city flair – making for a successful and unique combination.



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