


# Culinary Confessions: Devoted patrons loyal to Tio Pepe's

Groundswell devotion!

That describes my experience of Tio Pepe's, a Baltimore dining tradition for  more than 40 years. Known for authentic Spanish Mediterranean cuisine, Tio Pepe's is a welcome change for midtown foodies, around the corner from the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Arched grotto doorways, white rock walls, candle chandeliers, bright terra cotta décor signed "Spagna," and an all-male staff dressed in matador-style vests gives this restaurant an "other" world feel – maybe Barcelona, Segovia or perhaps Madrid?

I picked a good time to dine: restaurant week! Thirty dollars buys an appetizer, entrée and dessert. The popular liquor-filled sangria costs \$7 per glass. It's better to get a half-carafe and hail a cab. Sizeable dinner portions mean savings with leftovers or by sharing.

Devoted patrons, even those who struggle walking down the basement stairway entrance, pay homage in Uncle Pepe's kitchen regularly – insisting it's their favorite restaurant ever! Like faithful parishioners, they feel part of Pepe's family. Indeed, it felt like my own home during big family dinners with people everywhere – literally.

Unfortunately, I ate at the "kids' table" equivalent, next to the service tray, cramped in a busy corner that led to another jam-packed room. Getting jostled and sitting close enough to hear neighboring conversations felt like home, except it was more expensive and therefore more annoying.

The flavors and lukewarm service did not transport me to my happy days in Spain. The eight plates I sampled lacked vibrancy in color, taste and texture. For that price, plating should be more finessed and more beautifully presented. Using pre-peeled shrimp equals less color, flatter flavors and overly simplistic technique. Starchy

cream sauces unnecessarily covering several dishes tasted like undercooked roux. The Paella lacked the mark of authenticity – the Socarrat – crispy caramelized rice from cast-iron cooking. This tasted more like (tasty) jambalaya. The best flavor came from the accompanying sauce for the garlic shrimp – rich, deeply flavored and delightfully garlicky. But the shrimp were overcooked.

Most impressive was Tio Pepe's clientele. In their devotion, however, they seemed to overlook noticeable flaws. Fine dining can't have dusty cobwebs from light fixtures. Poorly washed dishes and utensils were very disappointing. At times frustratingly slow service despite constant bustling confused me.

A few regulars were greeted with smiles, but not one person greeted my unfamiliar presence with a genuine sense of welcome. Would I have been treated differently if I wore my priest collar or came with longtime patrons?

This unsavory experience humbly reminded me that our church, like a restaurant objectively striving to maintain excellence, can't rely on positive reviews from devoted members only, like the protective praise of doting mothers. As a church that serves hungry souls, do we warmly welcome the unfamiliar person as part the family and offer authentic Gospel teaching served with the dignity, beauty and purity (i.e., cleanliness) as God's people deserve?

Hopefully this culinary confession encourages the beloved Tio Pepe's to make necessary adjustments so that devotion to Baltimore's famous underground restaurant remains a lasting tradition.

*Father Patalinghug is founder of Grace Before Meals.*

*In reviewing restaurants and dining venues, Father Patalinghug gives up to 10 Hail Marys as penance for any "sins" he discovers during his visit. If everything was great, he'll give a Glory Be in thanksgiving. Categories rated are: food, menu satisfaction, meal presentation, pricing, beverage selection, ambiance, décor, service, accessibility and family friendliness.*

