

Rocket to Venus

3360 Chestnut Ave.
Baltimore, MD 21211
410-235-7887

Hours:

Monday-Sunday: 5 p.m.-2 a.m.
Dinner: 5-11 p.m. Happy hour
specials: 5-7 p.m. Sunday-Friday

Overall rating: ★★☆☆

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<http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/dining/63353,0,5710763.venue>

Note: The smoking policy is now no smoking from 5-9 p.m., smoking at the bar only from 9-11 p.m., and then smoking will be allowed from 11 p.m.-2 a.m. at the tables. Rocket to Venus: smoker's delight By Elizabeth Large Sun Restaurant Critic Originally published on January 21, 2007 Probably nowhere else in the universe could Rocket to Venus exist except in Hampden. The new bar-restaurant has a funky sci-fi decor; a hip, well-pierced staff, and a clientele that doesn't look old enough to vote, let alone drink. But its menu features pierogis and grilled cheese sandwiches as well as ceviche and walnut and sage pesto. And those black-clad servers are so friendly you wouldn't be surprised if they called you "hon." This is Hampden, after all. The wacky name is in honor of the Hampden space program, which according to legend began -- and ended -- in 1928. Three men attempted to launch a rocket ship to Venus. The story captured the imagination of Brian Carey and his partner Geoffrey Danek (who also owns Holy Frijoles). Danek may or may not live on the property where the unsuccessful launch took place, but who cares? The important thing is that it inspired the new owners to create a restaurant in the old Showalter's space with a futuristic decor that will remind you of The Jetsons, with horseshoe-shaped booths, an aqua and black color scheme, and copper and aluminum accents. But, because this is Hampden, it also looks like something out of the 1950s, not the 2050s, especially because what might be the original tile floor has been left alone. So why only two stars for atmosphere, when I clearly liked the look? It's simple: Not only do patrons smoke at the bar, but they also smoke at the tables, so there's no getting away from it. Also, if you sit as far away from the bar as you can, you're sitting near the front door. Even though this has been a warm winter so far,

the nights are chilly; and there was a lot of traffic in and out the night we ate there. The science fiction theme, thank goodness, continues no further than the decor. The menu is a charming collection of small plates, sandwiches, salads and a few entrees. There should be something for everyone as long as you don't deviate from the program. What do I mean by deviate from the program? Here's an exchange I had with the waitress when the kitchen got backed up, and we had drinks but no food: Me: Could we have some bread? Waitress: We don't have bread. We have pickled vegetables. Actually the restaurant has very good bread, a chewy baguette that I got by being my usual annoying self. Pickled vegetables don't go very well with wine, and Rocket to Venus has a decent, if very small, wine list. Pieces of baguette, toasted, come with the Thai mussels, and you need them to balance the fiery yellow curry sauce with tomatoes and leeks. Don't be timid and settle for the alternative, mussels in white wine and garlic. On the other hand, sometimes a classic is the right thing to order. The best thing on the menu has to be the Wimpies, four 2-ounce burgers on small, soft, fresh rolls that will remind you of the White Tavern burgers of your youth. Only these are better because they are loaded with fried onions, catsup and American cheese, plus there's a large pile of fries on the side. (You can substitute potato salad.) Oysters fried with a cornmeal batter and served very hot with a paprika butter sauce is one of those dishes you know is bad for you but tastes so good you don't care. Those are my three candidates for Best of Show. Everything else we tried had a glitch or two. Pasta puttanesca with a delicate sauce of tomatoes, black olives and capers would have been better without the pieces of dark-meat chicken, some of which were gristly. Three lamb rib chops came mysteriously cooked three different ways on one plate: well done, medium and practically raw inside. Fiery jerk chicken had a buttermilk biscuit and sweet cole slaw to cool the flames; why pile a side salad with winter tomato wedges and vinaigrette on the same plate? Not a lot of attention is paid to the looks of the plate at Rocket to Venus, but maybe that's because the kitchen is busy these days. A salad of beets, orange segments, candied walnuts and feta on greens had good flavors but not the style you might expect. One thing I like about the menu is its quirkiness. You can, for instance, get an amazing amount of Brussels sprouts in garlic butter for \$4, or a sloppy joe made with tofu in a sweet and sour sauce. What you can't get is dessert, at least not the night we were there. The waitress told us, "Sometimes they bring in pies." To me what makes Rocket to Venus worth visiting or not is whether you smoke or not. The experience isn't so fabulous that it's worth risking secondhand smoke damage for. But if you do smoke, I can't think of a better place in the city to get some imaginative, if uneven, food. ----- elizabeth.large@baltsun.com -----

----- Ratings: Food: ** 1/2 Service: *** Atmosphere: ** Rating
system: Outstanding: ****; Good ***; Fair or uneven **; Poor *