

Chewing through Charm City

It seems that every time I'm looking to go out to dinner, the same old question comes up: "Where to go?" It's so easy to get into a rut and go to the same restaurants all the time due to the familiarity and the comfort of knowing what to expect. But what fun is that? Baltimore is loaded with wonderful, creative restaurants; however, it feels risky to try somewhere new, knowing that you may drop \$50 or so on dinner and be disappointed.

So, how about sampling a few places without committing to dinner? Culinary tours offer just this type of opportunity, and recently, my partner and I participated in one by Charm City Chews (charmcitychews.com), owned by Baltimorean Sharon Reuter. Reuter puts together a fun and interesting food tour that not only allows you to sample some culinary treats but also provides some interesting historical facts. We opted for Reuter's "A Little Italy, A Little Not" tour where for \$55, Reuter took us to five restaurants. The well-organized, professional, yet casual, tour lasted about 2 ½ hours, and Reuter keeps the group size small to provide a personal experience.

We met Reuter and the other four attendees (two from Baltimore, two from Philadelphia) at the first stop on the Little Italy tour, Isabella's on South High Street. The small popular eatery is known for its brick oven pizza and paninis and since it was a nice day, Reuter took us to the adjacent bocce court where we enjoyed a delicious "Sonny," a sandwich made with mozzarella, fresh tomatoes, basil and olive oil. Here Reuter explained to us how Italians ended up living in



Charm City Chews provides handy carry-out containers. Photo by Paul K. Williams.

this neighborhood and then showed us the house where Nancy Pelosi lived. Next up was La Tavola on Albemarle Street. We sat down in the elegant dining room and feasted on gnocchi with a mild Gorgonzola cream sauce. Everything here is made fresh (we, in fact, saw a woman making gnocchi as we passed by the kitchen). The portions were huge, and Reuter cleverly brings Chinese takeout-style boxes with her logo on them to take leftovers home. As we ate, Reuter explained the history of Gorgonzola cheese.

For a non-Italian experience, we headed to Max's Empanadas, and enjoyed wonderful Argentine chorizo, cheese and walnut empanadas along with a glass of malbec wine. We learned that Max came to Baltimore to teach tango and ended up opening a restaurant. In continuation of the non-Italian theme, Mustang

Alley's was next – a beautiful, upscale bowling alley housed in a former Confederate hospital. Along the way, Reuter explained why Central Street is so wide – a canal used to run underneath. The filet mignon sliders paired with the Mustang Ale was delicious. We also got to go behind the scenes and see how to reset the bowling pins.

Our last stop was Piedigrotta Bakery, where cannolis, cookies and espresso drinks were served. This charming bakery is owned by Carminantonio and Bruna Iannaccone, and Carminantonio is credited with the invention of tiramisu!

All in all, we learned a lot, met new friends and ate more than our share of delicious food. And, as Reuter points out, "It takes you out of your comfort zone to try new places." 🍷