



Dining gems shine

It's the little things that make all the difference at these area restaurants

By Richard Gorelick Special to The Baltimore Sun
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Dining@Large
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Fresh Fresh Seafood owners Ricky and Darlene Parker run their small storefront place with grace. (Baltimore Sun photo by Barbara Haddock Taylor / August 14, 2008)

Perfection would be nice, but life, and bargain dining, seldom are. Often, it takes a happy-go-lucky outlook to find the true value in an evening out. It can be discovered sometimes in the specialty of the house, that one great thing that keeps diners coming back, but just as often in the ambience, the service and the management. I think of them as "grace notes," those small but essential things that made an average outing very good and a very good one exceptional. Here are some examples from six months of inexpensive dining.

•For instance, at **Grano** (1031 W. 36th St., 410-869-3429), Gio Troia's disarmingly simple Hampden pasta joint, it's the intimate setting that makes everything taste better. The precious few counter stools are perched just feet from the stoves, where Grano's cooks are putting together pastas and sauces. (The meaty bolognese is our favorite.) Troia himself is a constant and jovial presence at this popular new storefront BYOB.

•Similarly, at **Fells Point's** tiny **Burritos en Fuego** (809 S. Broadway, 410-558-0858), it's the esprit de corps behind the line that makes carrying out its fine burritos, quesadillas and tacos such a pleasure. Every day, patrons cram into this tiny space - yes, just like that Marx Brothers movie - but because the staff treats each other so well, the customers wait patiently, adroitly making room for new patrons to give their order. Baltimore's not always so charming, but here it is.

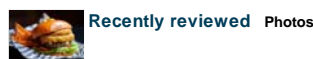
•Towson's **Fresh Fresh Seafood** (507 York Road, 410-821-3474) is all about the gracious way that Darlene and Ricky Parker run their small storefront business. I think this is the only time I've been asked whether I wanted my broccoli "soft or crunchy." Ricky Parker cooks fresh seafood dishes, including a big and wide crab cake; Darlene is out front, providing white-glove service.

•It's not just mom-and-pop places that dispense cups of kindness. At Power Plant Live's new **Luckie's** (10 Market Place, 410-223-1105), the staff seem invested in their work. Maybe it's because a core group of them worked together at Towson's **Vin** with general manager Billy Peterson and chef Justin McGuann. By anticipating needs, they make

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