



ROCKET TO VENUS

AN OUT-OF-THIS WORLD GASTROPUB IN BALTIMORE'S HAMPDEN

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

When Geoff Danek moved to the Hampden neighborhood of Baltimore in 2002, he had no idea that three guys back in the 1920s tried to build a 24-foot-tall rocket ship right in his garage. The local restaurant owner was told of the local legend by a customer – the legend of Baltimore native and so-called “mathematical genius” Robert Condit, who had used the home’s garage to build a rocket with his two friends, Harry and Sterling Uhler, in 1927 and 1928. They truly believed this rocket would take Condit to the planet Venus.

A year later, their money largely depleted, Condit packed up the rocket and took it to Florida where it was displayed on the Miami Beach boardwalk. Since then, the rocket and the Rocket Man have pretty much disappeared. But Danek, along with his friend and business partner, Brian Carey, loved the kooky tale so much that they named their gastropub restaurant Rocket to Venus. Opened in 2006, it still boasts a kitschy space theme today that customers find to be a delight. Condit’s rocket has even served as inspiration for parts of the interior, most notably the bar they built using hundreds of feet of half-inch copper tubing.

During a recent interview with the Beverage Journal, Danek said, “The restaurant itself tells this very interesting story that actually happened in this neighborhood decades ago. The name really fit the place for us.”

And the name really fits with our ongoing series of articles on res-

Laura Myers
manager
Rocket to Venus

taurants, bars, taverns, and pubs in and around the Maryland-Washington, D.C., area with funny or quirky names. The Rocket to Venus moniker has endeared itself to the locals, for sure, and attracts new customers from outside the area who venture to Hampden for the promise of perhaps a sci-fi themed eatery or maybe one that has ties to the aerospace industry prevalent in other parts of the state.

But a name alone can't make a business a success. Danek credits the Rocket to Venus staff as the main reason why the establishment will be celebrating its 20th anniversary next year. "A lot of our staff have been here for a long time," he noted. "They've formed relationships with the clientele. About 70 percent of our clientele is always there for us. Our 'regulars.' The hope is, of course, to pick up new people along the way. But we thrive because of the people who come back and see us and enjoy seeing the staff. Some of our employees have been with Rocket to Venus for 10-plus years . . . some for over 15 years!"

He continued, "They're the ones who truly run the place. They're the heart and the soul of Rocket to Venus. For our customers, stopping in and seeing them is like an extension of their own house. We're like a second home to many."

His staffers, notably manager Laura Myers and beverage manager Paul Krolian, also help him get through the tougher aspects of running



a service establishment in such a competitive market and tough economic climate. Danek remarked, "One of the really cool things about this business – and one of the things that you just have to know – is that it is so unpredictable. It constantly keeps us on our toes. It's all I know, because I have been doing this more than half my life. But it's always changing, always interesting. But for some people, it's just way too much stress. It's a lot of problem solving. But the business also al-



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lows you and your staff to be creative. You just have to roll with it and laugh sometimes.”

The creativity extends to the menu. Rocket to Venus’ food offerings change twice a year. Its drink menu is ever-evolving. “Our beverage manager, Paul, has done a really great job to cater to both the alcohol and non-alcohol side of things,” said Danek. “It’s been a lot of fun for him, and it’s been a lot of fun for our customers to try different things. Our drinks menu keeps people social. We saw after COVID, there was a big surge in people going out and being social again.”

He added, “Paul especially loves doing things with fresh ingredients. Right now, one of our favored spring-summer drinks is our Figgy Pop,

which is a cool play on Iggy Pop, the great musician and artist. It’s a fig vodka with seltzer water and a fresh orange slice.”

Because Krolian, Myers, and the rest of staff are given a lot of freedom to explore and take ownership of the business, too, Danek prefers to stay largely in the background and watch the magic happen. Rocket to Venus will indeed celebrate 19 years in business this December. “The business has evolved over that time to become a living, breathing thing of its own,” he said.

When asked to give some advice to other managers, bartenders, and waitstaff who might be reading this and hoping to own their own eating and drinking establishment one day, Danek was quick to answer: “You don’t have to make your bar or restaurant your 100 percent priority. Make sure you are still able to have some fun. Don’t look back later and wonder, ‘Why didn’t I have more fun? Why did I think, at every single moment, that I needed to be at the restaurant?’ You need to have a good, strong work ethic. But make sure you don’t burn out.” ■



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