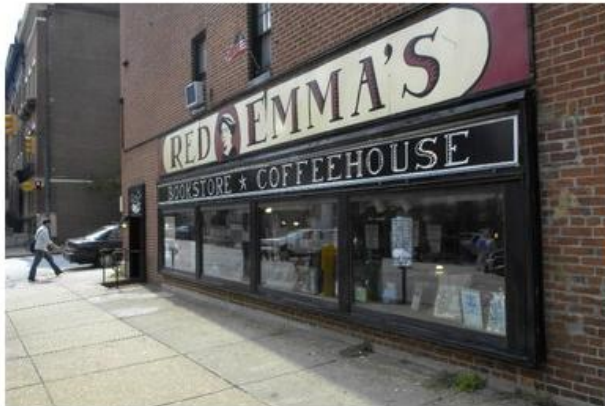




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Almost seduced by the dark side



I'm worried about Robert of Cross Keys. I'm afraid that associating with all the degenerate characters on this blog, including its writer, may be getting to him. Here's Robert and today's excellent Free Market Friday. EL

Right now I'm sitting in Red Emma's -- yes, Red Emma's. I'm trying to write my Free Market Fridays, or Fascist Fridays as my wife calls it, but it is hard to focus in here. I feel like the Jewish mother in "Fiddler in the Roof" when she goes into the Orthodox church

looking for her daughter. As I sit here in my Brooks Brothers shirt and sushi tie, I truly know the feeling of being a stranger in a strange place. ...

Oh well, the coffee here is actually very good...much better than Starbucks. I'm very surprised that communists have Splenda, but here it is right next to a vegan Death by Chocolate cake and some Bush t-shirts marked down 50 percent.

So, anyway, this weekend was my annual Ravens tailgate. I was hoping to bring one those **Texas hickory briskets** that I have written about, but I didn't order it in time. In its place the menu had a red theme, although different from the red theme I'm experiencing right now. We had homemade meatballs and sausage in marinara sauce alongside Bloody Marys.

The tailgate went great. I had a couple of sausage and meatball combo sandwiches on fresh rolls with Provolone, and I had a few Bloodies. I also did quite well in the battle of wits, which consisted of a three-hour onslaught of insults among friends about receding hair, expanding waistlines and fantasy football ineptness that was surprisingly interrupted with a rather lengthy debate on whether deism can be reconciled with evolution.

Oh yea, then there was a Ravens game. I cheered loudly. They played well. We won.

On the walk back to the car, I found myself hungry again. Now, I should have gone back to the meatballs and sausage, but I found myself saying that we should stop off at **Bill Bateman's** in Severna Park. I don't have much of a track record of making great decisions on days when drinking begins at 8 a.m., and this would be no different.

Bateman's: not good.

There was a time when I liked Bateman's. I'm not sure if I changed or they did, but it has been a long time since I've enjoyed anything about this place. The wings, both bourbon and original, were fair to poor, and nowhere near as good as what you can get at place like Cluck-U or even the old Damien's wings that Bateman's used to serve. The fries were truly forgettable, limp and flavorless. The onion rings were just strange. I think they had a breading normally seen on coconut shrimp.

I shouldn't just pick on Bateman's. There are a lot of places like them, particularly in the suburbs. Places that serve uninspired food that is bigger on portion than flavor. Places that nonetheless seem to attract a lot of customers, not all of which started drinking at dawn before going there.

As I wrote about last week, there are good places in the suburbs. Places like **Diamondback Tavern** that use quality ingredients procured from local sources to create well-composed dishes that are flavorful and affordable. There's a place in Anne Arundel County that also does this. It's called **Punk's Backyard Grill**, and it's where I went the day after the tailgate to recover from Bateman's.

Punk's, which is located in the Annapolis Mall, could easily be mistaken for some corporate eatery, but it is actually an independent restaurant that began as a thesis project of a group of students enrolled in Cornell's restaurant graduate program.

Their concept is to recreate a backyard cookout, but I think that undersells the quality of the food. This place isn't just serving up simple burgers and hotdogs alongside Natural Light and bug spray. Punk's has excellent food that is fairly sophisticated but not pretentious.

I started off with a salad of beets -- beets are very big this year, I'm seeing them everywhere -- oranges, orange oil, walnuts and goat cheese on arugula. It was a very fresh tasting salad with flavors that complemented each other. There was no skimping when it came to any of the ingredients, particularly the cheese and nuts that more often than not in salads like this are relegated to a cameo appearance.

I then had a turkey burger with applewood smoked bacon, cranberry relish and sage mayonnaise on a brioche bun. This burger had a lot of flavor and a nice balance of sweet from the brioche, tartness from the cranberry, savory from the sage and salty smokiness from the bacon.

For beverage and dessert I went with pumpkin flavor. I had a Dogfish Pumpkin Ale and a pumpkin bread pudding. Both had a nice seasonal taste, and neither was overly sweet.

What I really like about the food at Punk's is that it is thought out. Someone is saying this flavor goes with that flavor, and I'm going to combine them to create something special. Obviously, crafting a dish isn't anything new from a culinary perspective, but it is not something you always see at a casual restaurant. I appreciate that the turkey burger at Punk's isn't like something you'd see at Bateman's. You don't ask for ketchup or mustard. There are no optional add-ons of the cheese of your choice or bacon for 75 cents extra.

Well, what do you know? It seems that I'm coming out against the freedom to choose and opting instead to have someone make decisions for me. It is probably time for me to leave Red Emma's, but I think I'll try that vegan Death by Chocolate cake before I do.

(Jed Kirschbaum/Sun photographer)

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