

# Baltimore

MMMM! FRESH APPLE PIE!  
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## local flavor review



### A Star Is Born

**Chazz Palminteri opens his first restaurant here.**

BY SUZANNE LOUDERMILK

**CHAZZ: A BRONX ORIGINAL STYLE:** The décor takes diners into the Bronx's Arthur Avenue and scenes from *A Bronx Tale*. **CUISINE:** Italian-American cuisine with homemade pastas and pizzas. **YOU'LL FIND:** A custom-made, coal-fired pizza oven with a counter for seating.

For the month of June, Baltimore was star-struck. An actor came calling, and we rushed en masse to embrace him. We were thrilled that Chazz Palminteri had discovered us—and even more excited that he deemed us worthy of a restaurant.

So, it was no surprise that Chazz: A Bronx Original opened to much fanfare, with curious diners packing the Italian restaurant on the first day of a “soft opening.” Palminteri did his part, making the media

rounds and gripping and grinning with customers in the Harbor East spot, gloriously designed by Rita St. Clair Associates to capture the spirit of Palminteri's film *A Bronx Tale*.

The foyer recreates a New York subway entrance, moody murals portray the Bronx's Arthur Avenue, a raised area is reminiscent of a train platform, and flat-screen TVs show the movie, featuring Palminteri as Sonny the mobster and retelling a chapter of his own childhood as the boy Calogero. (Other movies

play, too.) The focal point of the dining room is a coal-fired “pizza altar,” where Chazz's signature dish is prepared.

But life goes on. Palminteri left the city and is on tour with his one-man show named after the film, leaving partners Sergio and Alessandro Vitale—the experienced restaurateurs of Aldo's in Little Italy—to run the operation.

If you somehow missed the story about how the men connected, here it is: Palminteri went to Aldo's while he was performing here a few years ago. He loved the restaurant's

*Clockwise from left:* Tagliolini “panna and speck”; Chazz partner Sergio Vitale; the Margherita pizza; the main dining room.

Italian cuisine and soon bonded with the Vitale brothers. The idea of opening a joint venture showcasing pizza and other Bronx specialties took shape, ending up as the finished product of Chazz.

Palminteri will come back to the restaurant, he promised. He even has his own booth there, where you're welcome to sit in his absence. For now, though, as the hoopla subsides, the focus is all about the food—as it should be. After all, this *is* a restaurant.

Even minus the star power, the place hasn't lost its buzz. On a recent weeknight, tables were filling up faster than the O's disabled list. Pizza ruled in the dining room, at the handsome bar, and at the pizza altar, where there is seating for guests. (The only drawback is that the closer you are to the oven, the hotter the surroundings are.) We couldn't resist ordering a pizza either, settling on the Margherita pie.

The 13-inch round featured a delectable thin crust, crisp at the base yet slightly fluffy on top, finished with sweet San Marzano tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella, and shreds of vibrantly green basil. A drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil made it a pizza to remember.

On our visit, only two other pizzas were served: a pepperoni and Parma prosciutto. Now, there are eight choices with more to come. The restaurant serves dinner but eventually will have lunch (maybe by press time, we were told) as well as late-night dining and take-out and curbside service.

The main menu is divided into several groupings; house-pickled vegetables, bruschette, Bronx-style appetizers, main dishes, house-made fresh pasta, and more. The entree portions are massive.

Appetizers are emboldened, too. The arancini and meatballs are as plump as tennis balls. It's no wonder you just get one to a plate.

The heavenly, golden arancini—a traditional Sicilian rice ball—was stuffed with beef Bolognese, peas, and mozzarella. The veal meatball was perched splendidly on sausage gravy with whipped ricotta. We managed to divide the orbs into quarters and still give everyone at the table a hefty bite to sample.

Then, we saw the Gulliver-sized main dishes. The tagliolini “panna and speck” is a gussied-up carbonara, with a mound of long,

paper-thin noodles, glistening with a rich Parmigiano cream sauce and resplendent with flecks of smoked speck ham. Not to be outdone, the fusilloni “Caprese” is an overly generous tangle of wide, toothsome noodles with curly edges suffused with fresh tomato sauce, mozzarella, basil, and pecorino.

Our chicken Parmigiana Americana featured two tender breaded cutlets, each as large as a dinner plate. We were surprised you had to order a side of pasta—a smaller version of the fusilloni—to go with the meat and that it wasn't complimentary. The veal spezzatino was a comforting mélange of braised meat, mushrooms, peppers, fingerling potatoes with Swiss chard and a polenta cake crisped on the outside and moist inside. There is a kid's dish, too—shells with butter and Parmigiano or tomato sauce for \$6.95.

The expected Italian desserts are on hand, mostly made in house. The tiramisù was an airy square of sponge cake layered with creamy mascarpone and set on a crisscross of sweet chocolate sauce. The lemon-honey ricotta cheesecake was a winner with a warm lemon-blueberry topping. We also like the decadent chocolate-espreso torte with a refreshing scoop of raspberry-lime granita.

But our favorite was the glazed chocolate mini doughnuts with a dish of vanilla gelato (an exchange that night; it's usually served with coffee gelato). We devoured the treat like kids stuffing Oreos and milk into our mouths.

Chazz is also a place to linger at the bar pre- or post-dinner with a handcrafted cocktail like an apricot Bellini or Negroni, homemade Limoncello, a glass of Italian wine, or a craft beer delivered at exactly 32 degrees.

We think Palminteri's newest production delivers solid performances for the most part. And we were happy to learn that the restaurant started offering appetizer portions of the pasta dishes.

That said, we will definitely go back for an encore.

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**Chazz: A Bronx Original**, 1415 Aliceanna St., 410-522-5511. Hours: dinner, 5-10 p.m. Sun.; 5-11 p.m. Mon.-Thurs; 5 p.m.-12 a.m. Fri.-Sat. Appetizers: \$8.95-14.95; entrees, \$14.95-24.95; pizzas, \$9.95-16.95; desserts, \$6.95-8.95.