

Restaurant review: Family Meal rings the bell for great food in the Inner Harbor

By [Richard Gorelick](#)

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Family Meal, a modern diner concept from the Frederick-based chef Bryan Voltaggio and his business partner, Hilda Staples, opened just after the new year at the Inner Harbor.

This is the second restaurant Voltaggio and Staples have opened in Baltimore in the past seven months; [Aggio](#), a contemporary Italian restaurant, opened last summer at Power Plant Live. Both Aggio and Family Meal are Voltaggio second editions, as it were. The original Aggio occupies part of the upper level in Washington's upscale Chevy Chase Pavilion. The first Family Meal opened in the spring of 2012 in a former car dealership located along a Frederick industrial corridor.

Family Meal is a sweet concept. The focus is on great American supper food like fried chicken, pork chops and meatloaf, with room made for regional fare such as shrimp and grits and international offerings like Korean chicken wings and eggplant Parmesan. The food we had on our visit was across-the-board wonderful: thoughtfully created, carefully prepared and handsomely presented. It's the kind of menu you can confidently jump right into.

For appetizers, we loved the meaty, juicy Korean barbecue wings, their crispy golden skin flecked prettily with thinly sliced toasted peanuts, pickled celery and cilantro. Get them. And we took right to the deviled eggs, their whipped yolks dressed simply with chives and pieces of crispy bacon. Chicken potpie fritters, little fried pastry balls filled with hot creamed chicken, were a fun and original adaptation of a comfort-food classic.

The fried chicken dinner was served in one of the most charming vessels east of the Mississippi — a large, golden bowl shaped like a chicken. It just looks so darn cheerful, filled with a pile of Family Meal's salty, peppery, crunchy wings, thighs and breasts, a buttery buttermilk biscuit, and thickly sliced pickles. It's all so engaging, and the chicken is marvelously juicy and flavorful beneath the skin.

We loved, too, an entree of shrimp and grits. The heads-on shrimp were firm and fresh-tasting, and the buckwheat and cheddar grits were firm and comforting. But what made this one of the best seafood preparations in town was the aromatic shellfish broth that permeated the whole dish. We also enjoyed the tender pork shank, coated with a dusky coffee-flavored barbecue sauce and served with yummy cheddar grits, pumpkin-fortified sauerkraut and meltingly good braised greens.

We didn't necessarily need side dishes. Our entrees, priced from the mid-teens to the low 20s, were plenty filling, but we're glad we ordered the not-gloppy barbecue baked beans; the macaroni and cheese, sprinkled with pimento and topped with crunchy bread crumbs; and especially the green bean casserole, an homage to and improvement on the Thanksgiving staple, with fresh green beans, shiitake mushrooms and flash-fried onions.

The five-item dessert list includes things such as Smith Island cake, pecan pie and caramel apple cake. We went for, and loved, a densely delicious devil's food sundae with chocolate fudge frosting, vanilla ice cream and soft caramel. A banana scotch pudding — a layering of butterscotch cream, shortbread and bruleed banana — had the distinction of being the only thing we didn't like. Something about its spongy consistency didn't please us.

Wine selections are approachable but limited to fewer than a dozen options, which strikes me as sensible — Family Meal's cuisine makes you want to order up a cold beer, and here the selection is more generous, with a smart selection of local craft beers from brewers such as Flying Dog and Brewer's Art. The cocktail program is even more inviting, with a "classics" selection of rickeys, sours, old-fashionedes and "cobblers," the last a sweetened concoction whose origins date to the 1800s.

Voltaggio has spoken about how he wants his restaurant to be welcoming for families, and Family Meal's regular menu should appeal to all but the most finicky young eaters. For small appetites, there is a "happy campers" section on the menu with things like chicken tenders and grilled cheese.

The Baltimore version of Family Meal is handsome and comfortable, with clean midcentury modern lines, curved banquette seating and a judicious use of reclaimed wood for decorative effect. But the big space, which is divided up into a casual front dining room, a central bar and a slightly more formal dining room at the back, is a little cold. Or at least it felt that way on a recent weeknight when we had Family Meal almost entirely to ourselves.

That Family Meal was playing so early in its run to a nearly empty house was not a shocker — January can be a lonely month at Inner Harbor restaurants. That slow night was apparently not an aberration, and Family Meal has already scaled back its hours of operation. The restaurant will resume a seven-day schedule in the spring, but for now it's open only Wednesday through Sunday.

That's a shame. The food deserves a following, and the service staff, which was thoroughly on point during our visit, deserves some company.

Family Meal**Rating:** 3.5**Where:** 621 E. Pratt St., Inner Harbor**Contact:** 410-601-3242, baltimore.voltfamilymeal.com**Open:** Wednesdays through Fridays 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.**Prices:** Appetizers \$4.99 to \$7.99, entrees \$11.99 to \$23.99**Food:** Traditional American supper food like fried chicken and meatloaf**Service:** Very attentive, informed and empathetic**Parking:** In nearby lots and on-street meters.**Children:** The restaurant has a " kids' menu with chicken tenders, grilled cheese and spaghetti.**Noise level/televisions:** Conversation is easy in the dining rooms. There are no televisions at Family Meal.**[Star key:** Superlative: 5; Excellent: 4; Very Good: 3; Good: 2; Promising: 1]