

In the beginning . . . an all-day affair with apps on the Munchmobile

Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com By Peter Genovese | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

on June 22, 2012 at 9:06 AM, updated June 22, 2012 at 9:52 AM



Jerry McCrea

Munchers pass plates at Lombardi's in Fairfield. Clockwise from right, JoAnna Silva, Mary O'Connor, Steve Kady and Susan Malanka.

You can't go anywhere these days without hearing about apps. The newest, coolest, most creative. The apps you must have, can't live without. Apps are where it's at — readily available, amazingly useful, always at your fingertips.

Yep, nothing like some plump mussels, crispy calamari, veggie spring rolls or rare ahi tuna to start your meal.

What, you thought I was talking about smart phones?

Appetizers set the tone, forecast the future, of any dinner. If the apps are bad, how can the entrees be any better?



Jerry McCrea

The gambas al ajillo (garlic shrimp) at Tapastry.

In the 13th century, King Alfonso of Castile miraculously recovered from a grave illness by drinking wine and eating small dishes between meals. That's how tapas began, the story goes. But appetizers (Russians call them zakuski, for "little bites") have been around since the beginning of, well, dinner.

We're not sure where sliced conch with hot pepper sauce, or ox tongue and tripe with roasted chile peanut vinaigrette, figure in the World Appetizer Timeline, but they were among the highlights of our Munchmobile all-day apps adventure.

For some, anyway.

"Hated the ox tongue; no one could possibly enjoy this!" Muncher Steve Kady said of the cold appetizer at Cheng Du 23 in Wayne.



Well, this taster enjoyed it, along with the spicy



Jerry McCrea

The sliced cabbage at Cheng Du 23 was one of the day's hits.

cabbage, the conch and ginger string beans.

Termite loved the cabbage, too, admiring its "nice crunch" and "gingery seasoning."

Oh yes, Termite. That's Mary O'Connor, Kady's niece; he gave her the nickname as a kid because she ate everything.

"Lively" doesn't do this Munch crew justice. Kady cracked us up with his Arnold Schwarzenegger imitations, not all of them using the proper words (hasta valista?). Gail Leicht, author of the "The

Skinny on ..." series of city guides, proved she was a tough, discerning critic.



Jerry McCrea

The pollo picante were the best appetizers at Tapastry.

And then there was the well-dressed woman outside Brix Tapas Grill in Belleville, who, after spotting yours truly, asked why her Munch application wasn't accepted last year, somehow including "iambic pentameter" and an epithet in the same sentence, not an easy feat.

Maybe if she had the appetizers at Brix — we'd recommend the white anchovies and carpaccio ahi tuna — she'd be in a better mood.

Apps — food, phone, whatever — are great, when they work.

Some worked on this trip, others not so much.

TAPASTRY, MONTCLAIR

"He was terrific — a beautiful leg!" an announcer for the Euro 2012 soccer tournament shouted from a TV inside Tapastry.

The restaurant — look for the wacky, winsome metal man made of assorted gears, belts and knobs in the window — has been open a year. The weekend brunch menu includes huevos, bocadillos (sandwiches), antojitos (snacks) and tapas.

The costillas a la barbacoa (barbecue spare ribs) boasted a nice smoky-charred flavor, even if none of the other Munchers thought so.

The gambas al ajillo (garlic shrimp), plump and piquant, seemed leagues ahead of the often-oily Ironbound staple,

even if Leicht found them "dry and mealy." O'Connor judged the mejillones con tomate y cebolla (mussels with tomato and onions) "bland and dry."

A group favorite: pollo picante (chicken skewers), which Susan Malanka described as "well-cooked and seasoned." No one seemed to like the tabla de embutidos (a sampler with jamon serrano or dry-cured Spanish ham; chorizo seco and cantimpalo, a chorizo made with paprika).

Leicht said Tapastry "wouldn't last five minutes in Barcelona." The Munchmobile driver, who's never been to Spain (but he's been to Oklahoma) might beg to differ.



Jerry McCrea

Loved the sliced conch at Cheng Du 23.

CHENG DU 23, WAYNE

Walk past the fish tank, order the ants.

That would be Ants Climbing a Tree, a minced pork and cellophane noodle dish at Cheng Du 23, a short walk from Willowbrook Mall.

Kimchi aside, cabbage does not rank high on a list of sexy dishes. Try the spicy cabbage here and you'll see the light. It's a fiery, crispy delight.

"Bright and fresh — wonderful balance," an awed Leicht said.

Malanka marveled over the "contrasts" in the sliced conch with hot pepper sauce — "crisp vegetables; mild, tender conch; spicy sauce."

The ginger string beans were another hit; JoAnna Silva called them "just crunchy enough with the perfect amount of ginger."

Predictable scallion pancakes, but the steamed juice bun, in a bewitching dark vinegar-ginger sauce, was one of the day's top appetizers. "The mixed pork and soup was a great surprise," Kady said.

Chocolate-flavored fortune cookies? That's different. "If you never change your mind," read the Munchmobile driver's fortune, "why have one?"

Oh, is that how it works?

LOMBARDI'S BAR & RESTAURANT, FAIRFIELD

This restaurant-bar could serve as a sports museum, with its collection of jerseys, balls, photos and newspaper headlines.

The menu advertises "Jersey's best thin crust pizza," which will come as a surprise to those, like this writer, who

consider Star Tavern in Orange the state's best thin crust.

One reader raved about the Lombardi's Platter, a heap of sautéed broccoli rabe, broccoli, sausage, long hot peppers, potatoes and provolone. But they were out of broccoli rabe, and the resulting dish was a misfire, with overcooked broccoli and mushy potato chips.

The calamari was predictable, and the artichoke hearts oreganata oily. Leicht's least favorite — and O'Connor's most favorite — dish turned out to be the eggplant rollatini.

"Delicious and flavorful," according to O'Connor. Best app: the wings, plump and crisp (get the Buffalo sauce on the side).

SHAWARMA EXPRESS, HIGHLAND PARK

Niki Salajaj, behind the counter at Shawarma Express, looked familiar: He was a waiter at Sahara Restaurant in New Brunswick, a Munchmobile stop in 2007. Salajaj opened the Middle Eastern restaurant a year ago in a space once occupied by a pizzeria. "I wanted to find the right place, the right size, casual, very simple," he explained.

The food is fresh, fast and better than fine. The hummus with shawarma (sandwiches or dishes made with lamb, beef or chicken sliced from revolving towers of meat) was an unqualified hit. "The flavors of garlic, sesame and lemon all came out in the hummus ... puts store-bought hummus to shame," Malanka said. Leicht admired the "wonderful smoky, tangy flavor."

The tabouli (finely ground wheat, mint leaves, parsley, scallion, lemon juice and olive oil) and babaganush (puree of grilled eggplant, parsley, lemon juice and garlic) are above average. Don't ignore the homemade sauces, especially the spicy sweet chili and the chimichurri, the Argentinian garlic and parsley mix.

One misstep: the spicy chicken fingers; the spice seemed to have made a right turn before the Albany Street Bridge.

Irresistible: the thick pita, from Brooklyn. Run it through the near-heavenly hummus — you'll thank me later.

TASTE, RED BANK

The Galleria Red Bank, completed in 1907, is a handsome brick building that once housed a textile manufacturer and now is home to Siam Garden, the Melting Pot, Tommy's Coal Fired Pizza & Bar and Taste.

Taste is a shrine to smaller plates, with its bruschettas, pizzettes, "Tasters" (diver scallops, Kobe beef patties, etc.) and Small Bites, which include a shrimp scampi baguette, and a chicken-and-roasted pepper quesadilla.

The "Taste This Plate," with goat-cheese-stuffed sun-dried tomatoes; feta-topped cerignola olives; blue cheese-stuffed green olives; and Parmesan-dusted artichoke hearts, looked pretty, but tasted pretty average. Leicht called it "a weak version of an Italian antipasti platter," although Malanka said the combination of olives was "to die for."

The Munchmobile driver, who never met an olive he didn't like, concurred.

The best app: the crab-stuffed roasted jalapeños, with jumbo lump white crab, aged white cheddar, applewood bacon and scallions.

"A taste-bud explosion in my mouth!" O'Connor exulted.

The horseradish and bacon deviled eggs, though, were a disappointment. "Nothing devilish about it — bland," Silva said. "My aunt's homemade eggs are much better," O'Connor added.

BRIX TAPAS GRILL, BELLEVILLE

The co-owners of Brix are contractors, so Brix is a play on "bricks," right?

Wrong.

The restaurant's name comes from the system used to determine the sugar content of grapes for wine.

The decor — high-ceilinged, brick-walled, exposed duct work — is bistro meets sports bar meets club. The tapas menu largely consists of Italian appetizer standards — meatballs, broccoli rabe and sausage, calamari, rice balls.

The carpaccio ahi tuna, in a sirachi remoulade and wasabi cream, was an awesome app. "A show-stopper — a rich, tasty combo of tuna and seasonings," Kady said.

The meatballs, in a San Marzano tomato basil sauce, were better than expected, but the mozzarella in carozza was "boring," according to O'Connor. "You can find this in any chain restaurant," she pointed out.

Anchovies may not rank high on most people's favorite-apps list, but the white anchovies at Brix, marinated in white wine, lemon and olive oil, are highly recommended.

"Anchovies are hard to do well," Leicht explained. "These were bright, fresh and not overly fishy."

There were raves for the fig and cheese pizza, but it didn't qualify as an appetizer, and besides, we're doing pizza next month.

"We didn't get home until after midnight!" Malanka would later report.

Didn't sound like she was complaining.

WHERE WE MUNCHED

Brix Tapas Grill: 371 Franklin Ave., Belleville; (973) 751-7001. Hours: 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Tuesday through Sunday; closed Monday. Kitchen open until 11 p.m.; pizza until 2 a.m.

Website: brixtapasgrill.com

Cheng Du 23: 6 Willowbrook Road, Wayne; (973) 812-2800. Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week.
Website: chengdu23.com

Lombardi's: 94 Fairfield Road, Fairfield; (973) 227-0003. Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday;
11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday; noon to 11 p.m. Saturday; noon to 9 p.m. Sunday. Website: lombardisnj.com

Shawarma Express: 418 Raritan Ave., Highland Park; (732) 640-1461. Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through
Saturday; closed Sunday. Website: shawarmaexpressnj.com

Tapastry: 12 Church St., Montclair; (973) 233-0216. Hours: 5 to 10:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; noon to 10:30
p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Website: tapastryrestaurant.blogspot.com

Taste: 10 Bridge Ave., Red Bank; (732) 219-9770. Hours: noon to 2 a.m. seven days a week. Website:
redbanktaste.com

MUNCHERS

Gail Leicht

Mahwah

Author, "The Skinny on ..." city guides

Inside info: Her books offer "discriminating reviews, stirring criticisms and a buffet of quality tips."

Susan Malanka

Cranford

Stay-at-home mom

Inside info: Worked in bakeries and candy stores as a teen; says she possesses an "iron stomach."

Mary O'Connor

Franklin Park

Personal trainer/fitness instructor

Inside info: Nicknamed "Termite" by her uncle, Steve Kady, "for the vast quantities of food she can consume."

JoAnna Silva

Newark

Secretary for a Superior Court judge

Inside info: Her three favorite Ironbound restaurants are Sol-Mar, Spanish Sangria and Don Manuel.

Steve Kady

Kendall Park

Lieutenant, East Jersey State Prison

Inside info: Cracked us up on the way home with his off-key Arnold Schwarzenegger imitations.

MUNCH RAIL

LIVE CHAT WITH THE FOOD DUDE

Every Wednesday at 12:30 p.m., you can live-chat with Peter Genovese. Talk Munchmobile or food in general, he'll always have an opinion — and a hot new tip. Or pass one along. Visit nj.com/entertainment.

LETTER OF THE WEEK

If you are planning an excursion this summer that involves candy, ice cream, cake and/or pies, I am your girl. I am a marathon runner and burn mad calories, so I am always in the mood for the sweet treats. I recently ran the Boston Marathon in record heat and lost about 8 pounds in the process. I could stand to spend a day eating with the Munchmobile crew.

— Rene Rovtar

T-SHIRT GIVEAWAY

Each week, we give a limited-edition Munchmobile T-shirt to the first two people who answer our trivia question correctly. Last week's question: Who won the Jersey Shore Food Truck Wars contest? The answer: Red Hook Lobster Pound. The winners: Kathleen Taylor of Highland Lakes and John Abatemarco of Nutley.

This week's question: At which Munch stop can you find the Jersey Fist Pump? Call the Munchmobile Hotline.

TELL US WHERE TO GO

Tomorrow, it's Mom and apple, blueberry, cherry, banana cream and whatever other kind of pies we can find. Who makes the best pies? Call the Munchmobile Hotline at (973) 392-1765 or e-mail pgenovese@starledger.com.

Peter Genovese: (973) 392-1765 or pgenovese@starledger.com. Twitter: @NJ_Munchmobile or @petegenovese.

© 2015 NJ.com. All rights reserved.