

Grazing at Gotham Market at the Ashland

Critic Robert Sietsema sizes up Brooklyn's newest food court


by Robert Sietsema | Feb 3, 2017, 3:06pm EST

Especially in Midtown, the Financial District, and Chelsea, the market for food courts may be saturated. In the last couple of years they've been sprouting like spring flowers, each new one modifying the formula to best exploit the ungainly spaces they are often fitted into.

We've had small food courts with only a few vendors (Berg'n), and big food courts with a score or more (Urbanspace Vanderbilt). We have luxury food courts (Plaza Food Hall), and ones driven by celebrity chefs (the Pennsy). One new innovation has been food courts with a single vendor creating multiple stalls, scrambling to cover several food fads at once (Union Fare). And finally, we have a food court representing the fare of a single foreign country, in this case Denmark (Great Northern Food Hall).

The new frontier for food courts may be Brooklyn. The latest example is Gotham Market at the Ashland, a food court inserted into the ground floor of a luxury apartment building on the edge of Fort Greene, with rentals that top out at around \$7,000 per month. Clearly, this is not a venue destined for cheap eats. While its aspiration may be to attract customers from Barclays Center a quarter-mile away, residents of the surrounding new high rises will likely provide customers enough in this comparative restaurant wasteland near the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

The "curator" of the food court, as the apartment building website has it, is John Stage, the restaurateur behind the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que chain. He also runs three of the five currently operating spaces within the complex (there will eventually be two more, one overseen by him, the other by chef Marc Vidal as a fourth branch of Boqueria). Generically speaking, this makes Gotham Market a hybrid of two kinds of modern food court: the small-selection type, and the single-vendor type.

The architect-driven buildout is modernistic and relatively handsome. There's plenty of seating and most of the chairs have backs (though the seats themselves are child-sized). Colorful globe pendants dangle overhead from a high ceiling, like the lobby of an opera house. 

Facing the entrance is a long counter called Bar Granger. Like a cow catcher on the front of a steam locomotive, it's designed to snag customers the moment they enter, and bottles of single malt Scotch are prominently displayed. Perhaps you're renting a \$7000 apartment upstairs and would like to enjoy a few shots.

For the rest of us there's a beer selection at relatively restrained prices — averaging \$7 per pint — for craft-brewed Brooklyn beers, solidifying the market's role as more bar than restaurant. Indeed, Gotham Market at the Ashland is one of a crop of new, booze-driven food courts — the Pennsy and Berg'n among them — where the alcohol nearly

overshadows the food. (Note that many earlier food courts didn't even serve alcohol.) Stage is responsible for Bar Granger, and the two establishments that flank it: Apizza Regionale and Flip Bird.

Apizza Regionale specializes in small-circumference pies baked in a red beehive oven in the Neapolitan style — though the name suggests more of an affinity with New Haven places like Frank Pepe, Sally's, and Modern Apizza. The pizzas are wetter and far cheesier than most Neapolitan pies — though, apart from cheese, the other ingredients are sparsely strewn. Of the seven pizzas offered, three friends and I tried two: apizza, the simplest pie featuring tomato sauce and three cheeses (\$14) and the Calabrian (\$16), topped with hot soppressata and chili honey, with the sausage hidden under a blanket of cheese. We preferred the first, though the second tasted remarkably similar. Other pies feature mushrooms, meatballs, and potatoes as their marquee ingredients.

Flip Bird takes as its subject matter the contrast between fried chickens and rotisserie chickens, and the slogan displayed on signs and t-shirts is, "Flipped Or Fried?" The rotisserie bird is said to have North African flavors, though the effect of the spicing scheme is negligible. These are big plump birds with well-browned skins, and a half chicken goes for \$17, plus tax, including two sides from a list of five. The fried chicken seems like a smaller bird, and three pieces with the same two sides will set you back \$13.

My crew loved the fried chicken (though I thought the starchy coating thicker and harder than it ought to be), but felt like the rotisserie chicken was too marshmallow-y. "This piece looks like a slice of cheesecake," a friend quipped. We disliked three of the four sides we tried, which seemed selected for their steam-table longevity and inexpensive preparation costs. The thin french fries were good, but the broccoli rice and stewed white beans weren't; the skimpy garden salad fell somewhere in between. John Stage will also begin operating a breakfast counter called Egg at the Bird at some future point.

An arch on the left leads to one of two current vending areas not operated by Stage. It's a bi-level restaurant called Mason Jar, a branch of a Murray Hill pub that offers barbecue and such Southern fare as shrimp and grits and fried chicken. Mason Jar seems like part of the food court, yet also detached from it, and offers a separate bar, along with chandeliers made from — What else? — Mason jars. Eating there requires complying with some complicated rules, as we shall shortly see.

The brisket was wet and gray, with no smoke ring, though it tasted slightly smoky. The sausage, though nicely hash-marked from the grill, tasted like supermarket Polish sausage and came on a bed of sauerkraut. Not too Southern. At \$28 for two small skillet of barbecue (from a choice of five), along with a puny side of mac and cheese and nothing else, the price seemed exorbitant. But even worse was a "Low Country kale salad" (\$16) which supplemented five undressed leaves with blackeyed peas, slippery mushrooms, and a few rods of deep-fried ham, killing whatever healthy aura the salad might have achieved. This was one of the two worst things we ate at Gotham Market.

The other was the crab nachos (\$17) at Crabby Shack. Among Gotham Market's offerings, this so-called pop-up is the least predictable. It also departs furthest from the very meaty and vegetable-impooverished formula Gotham Market represents. Many of the dishes involved large wads of indifferent crabmeat in a variety of configurations, including crab tacos, crab grilled cheese, crab chowder, and crab BLTs. We also tried the de rigueur lobster roll (\$20), which, like the kale salad, is a feature of every food court, making us wonder, where was the poke? The sandwich was generous, though not particularly tender. It was made entirely of claw meat. Where were the tails?

In its emphasis on obvious foods, Gotham Market represents a departure from those previous food courts that strive for variety and novelty, as well as those that present at least a few healthy options. This is not a bad thing, but it means choices are limited.

Nevertheless, for the immediate neighborhood, it could function well as an upscale pizzeria or fried-chicken joint, though the price might make you go a little further afield to save a few bucks. Its highest calling may be as a destination for families with young kids. The children love the sweet and greasy food and rat race around the premises, while the parents sip the strong mixed drinks, with obvious sighs of relief.

And what were the strange rules I mentioned earlier? Apizza Regionale and Flip Bird use those flat, flashing electronic devices to let diners know when food is ready. But we were instructed not to pick up an order when the thing goes off, but to wait at the table as dish runners wander around the premises, absurdly calling names.

We were also told not to sit at the bar because the devices won't work there, which sounded an awful lot like a lie. Clearly, the management wants to keep the bar for serious drinkers who don't bother with food. Another rule is that customers can't order anything from Mason Jar and have it delivered outside the door to the food court proper. However, they can order in the food court and have it delivered to a Mason Jar table, while a waiter looks on, crestfallen. Is that fair? Doubtlessly, these rules all have good reasons, but Kenny Shoppin would be impressed anyway.