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## 5 & Dine: Where to get mussels in Baltimore now that Bertha's has closed



Mussels at Stella Notte restaurant in Ellicott City. (Kendyl Kearly / Staff Photo)



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If you were craving mussels in Baltimore six months ago, you likely knew exactly where to go. Bertha's Mussels was a 51-year institution in Fells Point, known for its comfortable atmosphere, live music that drifted along Broadway and green bumper stickers that had sightings around the world. Diners could sample favorites like garlic butter mussels or the Maryland spin with Guinness Old Bay, accompanied by French fries.

Although mussel dining isn't quite as prolific as Maryland's crab and oyster houses, the Baltimore area still has plenty of worthy destinations. Here are five local eateries rising to the challenge of filling the Bertha's void:



Build-a-catch seafood boil bag with black mussels and New Zealand mussels in mild house special blend sauce at Baltimore Seafood. (Kenneth K. Lam/Staff photo)

### Baltimore Seafood

Part of the satisfaction of ordering mussels is the presentation, the activity of it. You might get your fingertips slightly dirty to pry stubborn shells open, dunk them in sauce and toss the empties aside. Canton's Baltimore Seafood pushes it further: A plastic bag filled with boiled seafood, potatoes, corn and sauce is deposited at the table for diners to dump out, conjuring a puff of warm shellfish aroma.



"It catches the eye," manager Robby Lambert said. Plus, the New Orleans-inspired method keeps the food hot, and shaking the bag lets sauce drizzle over every morsel, he said.

The build-a-catch bags are customizable — choose among clams, crawfish, shrimp (heads on or off), scallops, lobster tail, four kinds of crab and both black and New Zealand green mussels. And there wasn't a puny mussel in the bunch.

Guests also pick from three spice levels and five sauces. The special house blend is the most popular and a combination of the others, Lambert said, an easygoing mix of Old Bay, lemon pepper, garlic butter and Cajun. Add-ons such as sausage and eggs are available, or customers can upgrade to the even larger Big Catch 3-pound meal for \$69 or the \$120 Poseidon's Catch, which purports to be the priciest boil bag in the city.

Baltimore Seafood also makes the most of a quality product by hosting Mussel Mondays (a pound of black mussels and half-pound of shrimp for \$24), and by featuring the mussels in two other entrees: Ocean Paella and a garlic-loaded but tasty Sailor Pasta.

With happy hour deals like \$5 heavy-pour rum punches and its seafood-shack-meets-Instagram decor, the restaurant's intention seems to be introducing a younger clientele to what a Maryland seafood house has to offer. Hence, the neon on the greenery wall, positioned beside a classically tacky pirate statue, proclaims: "Seafood diet, see food, eat it." 2324 Boston St., 410-624-5166, [bmoreseafood.com](http://bmoreseafood.com)



Sesame-roasted feta with pita bread is an appetizer item at Cypriana.

Barbara Haddock Taylor / Baltimore Sun

## Cypriana

The mussels at the upscale Cypriana in Tuscany-Canterbury aren't the kind you'll knock back with a beer while watching the game. These are mussels that require one's full attention. Chef-owner Maria Kaimakis' iteration are sort of a mussels Rockefeller: a few fire-roasted New Zealand greens, their larger shells stuffed with blue crab, baby spinach, Reggiano cheese and lemony ouzo cream sauce. The mussels get a bit lost in the luxuriousness of

But you won't fill up on only mussels at Cypriana, so pick some more small plates. The menu has a few hummus and cheese options, such as feta roasted in a wood-burning oven and covered in sesame seeds and wildflower honey. Kaimakis invented the dish, one of her best-sellers, for people who don't normally like the crumbly texture of feta. She went through a dozen types until she found one that gets creamy inside and crusty outside when cooked. But the sheep's milk feta from Thessaloniki, Greece, is salty and sour, and needed the honey and nutty sesame to balance, she said.

Drizzled with a balsamic-fig reduction and served with tahini, grilled eggplant is Kaimakis' nod to baba ghanouj. She avoided the traditional version because of its saturation in America's Greek restaurants: "I want every plate to be special." 105 W. 39th St., 410-837-7482, [cypriana.com](http://cypriana.com)



The sign outside Lee's Pint & Shell in Canton.

Karl Merton Ferron / Baltimore Sun

## Lee's Pint & Shell

For Bertha's devotees, Lee's Pint & Shell in Canton might be the best substitute in terms of its cozy, social environment enjoyed over shellfish. As my dining partner said, "This is everything a Baltimore bar should be." Park on a stool for the better part of an afternoon, and the staff are likely to remember names and serve up as many of the advertised pints and shells as you can slurp down, with a host of specials thrown in.

Mussels come in three forms: the Seafood Bowl medley, a standard garlic and white wine, and the BOH Mussels, made with National Bohemian beer, andouille sausage and Old Bay. The mussels themselves were small, but the broth helped warm up a November day, and without being asked, a bartender brought out more of the fluffy, toasted bread to sop up the last of it.

Lee's oysters are also worth noting, 75 cents a shuck on happy hour, as we grieve [the loss of The Local Oyster](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/01/11/mussels-baltimore-berthas/), another community shellfish giant. 2844 Hudson St., 410-327-2883, [leespintandshell.com](http://leespintandshell.com)



Mussels at Stella Notte restaurant in Ellicott City

## Stella Notte

Fresh off a renovation last year, the ambiance alone deserves a trip to Ellicott City mainstay Stella Notte, characterized by the colors of van Gogh's "The Starry Night," intimate seating and a tree bedecked with Christmas lights sprawling through a glass-walled dining room. And the Prince Edward Island mussels, a staple since the Italian restaurant opened nearly two decades ago, according to partner Dan Robinson, are a hearty, shareable, date night delicacy befitting of the space.

The fat mussels come in white or red, the former being the simpler version of wine, garlic, lemon and butter, steamed until they open, Robinson says. For the red, Stella Notte adds a sauce of California crushed tomatoes, oregano and basil. I thought it might be heavy and marinara-like before ordering, but it's bright and full of tomato flavor. The soft Italian bread served tableside is a perfect vehicle, though it's hard not to eat it with the olive oil and 13-ingredient Romano cheese mixture that it comes with.

But the mussels are better left on their own rather than ordered as the frutti di mare pasta with mussels, scallops, shrimp and clams. That bounty of seafood was enticing, but big chunks of tomato in the sauce left the whole thing watery and under-seasoned. The pasta had me looking longingly back at my plate of empty plain mussel shells.

8809 Baltimore National Pike, Ellicott City, 410-461-1122, [stella-notte.com](http://stella-notte.com)



A bag of black and New Zealand green mussels at Super Boil restaurant

## Super Boil

Don't be discouraged by Super Boil's strip-mall-like aesthetic on Reisterstown Road with its food pictures in the windows and sea creatures mounted onto walls. The menu is huge and ranges from seafood boils to hibachi and teriyaki, and everything I tried delivered.

Super Boil also serves seafood boils in customizable plastic bags, but unlike Baltimore Seafood's, this menu won't be advertising the most expensive of anything. Half pounds of green or black mussels are only \$8, or \$14 for the pound, and the shellfish were just as plump. Choose from five wet or dry seasonings, four spiciness levels and traditional add-ons. In addition, Super Boil offers many combos to get mixes of mussels, crab, shrimp, crawfish, lobster and accompaniments, or even a seafood tower.

On the Japanese side, chicken hibachi fried rice was beautifully cooked with a honeyed char on the meat, and the creamy yum yum sauce made it pure comfort food. A dozen hush puppies were sweet, lightly fried and not greasy at all, a feat with so many dishes to execute. The house half-sweet tea refreshes after the salt and spice. 7000 Reisterstown Road, 443-660-9257, [superboilmd.com](http://superboilmd.com)

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