

When the Baltimore Foodies get together, it's all about good wine, good food and making good friends. **By Matthew P. Taylor**

Founder Lars Busins (center) convenes another dinner meeting of the Baltimore Foodies at Abacrombie Fine Food.



Taste buds

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KIRSTEN BECKERMAN

Last year, as football season drew to a close, Lars Rusins found himself casting about for excuses to hang out with "the boys." The 44-year-old father of two decided that he and his close friends (former co-worker Matt Katz and brothers Dave and Scott Baker) should supplement their Sunday afternoon tailgates in Lot B/C at M&T Bank Stadium with monthly dinners at local restaurants.

Rusins' idea went over well with his friends, of course. And after he gave his wife, Judy, a forlorn look, she said, "Yeah, you can still go out with the boys and play once a month," recalls Rusins.

The boys started sampling tasting menus—picked out by Rusins—at places like Corks, Soigné and Petit Louis. Soon thereafter, Rusins, in what he terms a "vodka-induced rant," cooked up a plan for a larger, more official dining group: the Baltimore Foodies. The "Foodie" label may suggest pretension but an evening with Rusins and friends produces more self-deprecation than self-importance.

"We went to football games, got drunk and rowdy, and had a good time," says Katz, a social sparkplug who works in marketing at North-Star Nutritionals. "Then we started doing tasting menus, got drunk and rowdy, and had a great time tasting food."

After drawing nine people—six of whom were friends—to Charles Street in January 2005 for the Foodies' inaugural event at Copra, Rusins, a stay-at-home dad who previously worked in manufacturing operations, has been selling out dinners ever since. The group typically hosts 20 or so people at its dinners, depending on the size of the restaurant. Rusins consistently solicits feedback from members and guests, which led to one of the Foodies' most popular outings, an "Iron Chef"

night at Mirato. The eight-course Japanese shikate menu included toro takaki, lobster with shitake mushrooms and steamed red snapper.

Rusins notes his members' food preferences and allergies when planning tasting menus and makes allowances he says other dining groups might not. However, there are limits to what he'll accommodate.

"No Atkins, no South Beach, real bread, real butter," says Rusins, reinforcing the Foodies' mission to celebrate, rather than avoid, flavorful food. "We have red wine—that's good for you."

The membership-based Baltimore Foodies now meet "once, twice or thrice" a month, according to their own literature, at locally owned establishments to break bread and enjoy more than a few laughs. Sometime during the meal, Rusins invites the chef out from the kitchen to talk to the group about the meal. The native New Jerseyite tries to re-create the dinner party atmosphere of his youth with a communal dining table at Foodies events. "It's like a big '80s dinner party, enjoying good food, talking across the table, sharing wine," says Rusins. "The Big Chill" was my generation."

Dinners are pre-paid affairs, with casual meals in the \$40 range and more upscale restaurants cost-

consistently attract more women than men.

Monyka Berrocosa-Marbach, an independent food and wine consultant and Foodies member, describes dinner outings as "a great place for a food-loving lady to have a terrific meal, meet neat people and feel comfortable whether she's accompanied or not."

Berrocosa-Marbach credits Rusins with creating a "fun, food savvy not snobby" atmosphere that contributes to the group's success.

"Baltimore Foodies is a group that celebrates good food and drink yet they don't lose sight of the human aspect," says Berrocosa-Marbach. "Lars has a knack for attracting one of the most varied groups of people I know—different ages, different economic status, different professions, different interests even. The common denomi-

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ing \$85, including wine. Non-members pay \$10 more unless it's their first event with the Foodies. Overall, the Foodies have 122 members and regular attendees and more than 1,400 people receive a free weekly E-newsletter.

Members largely escape definition. Originally touted as a group for young professionals, the Foodies have entertained diners as young as 25 and as young at heart as 62.

They are not a singles group, but the great majority of diners are unattached. The combination of fine dining and drinking has led to at least one acknowledged romance among members, along with several healthy portions of flirtation.

And while the Foodies may be an offshoot of Rusins' original boys club, the group's dinners now

netor, though, is a desire to enjoy what life has to offer, beginning with good food, good conversation and good times."

It seems Lars Rusins has accomplished his goal of finding new ways to hang out among friends. But this time he's brought along more people for the ride.

"We want to keep it fun, that's the most important thing," says Rusins. "That's how it started, four guys going out and having fun. Now it's 18 to 20 people going out and having fun." □

For more information, see www.baltfoodies.com.

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