

Richmond Times-Dispatch

DANA CRAIG/RESTAURANT CRITIC

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While sitting in a locals-favorite sandwich shop/wine store during a recent trip to Virginia Beach, our conversation drifted to the importance of sandwiches. "I *have* to eat a sandwich *every* day," my worldly dining companion grunted with authority as he went to town on a behemoth of said food item.

As I glanced around at the surrounding wine racks, his, ahem, profound statement actually got me thinking. Sandwiches and wine are probably the two things I consume most often -- not usually together but consistently nonetheless.

But why don't I usually quell my sandwich cravings with a side of vino? I mean, the wine bar has been around in Europe for ages -- spots where diners can enjoy casual, often pre-made eats along with a decent selection of grape-based libations.

Thankfully, the Richmond area now has a loosely defined version of such a place. Newly opened just east of Innsbrook, Verde is a contemporary café that "strives to enhance life through the pleasure of eating," according to its Web site.

And if your pleasure involves the opportunity to grab a quick, made-fresh-daily meal and a reasonably priced yet eclectic bottle of wine on the way home from work, Verde is most definitely your place.

Verde is brought to you by Scott Mitchell, a former Robins Cellars wine rep and server at Patina Grill; Rob Jones, owner of Sports Page Bar & Grill; and Dr. Juan Astruc, a local physician interested in giving Richmonders an outlet for healthful, mostly organic eats.

Boasting an array of wraps, panini and Mediterranean-inspired side items, Verde is not only a good spot for a casual lunch or dinner but also the perfect solution for time-crunched workers, thanks to its catering and delivery options.

I stopped in with three friends on a recent weeknight. Though the funky lime green- and terra cotta-washed space was empty when we arrived, a consistent stream of regulars passed through, picking up dinner and wine to go.

Verde

Rating: ★★★

Where: 10325 W. Broad St., Glen Allen

Phone: (804) 217-9333

Web site: <http://www.verdefreshfood.com>

Noise level: average

Vegetarian options: salads, panini, sides

Smoking: smoke-free

Hours: 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Friday and 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

Prices: \$2.99-\$9.99

Check for two: \$21 (including soup, two sandwiches, one side and tax)

Verde's food menu is simple yet appealing: hearty and flavorful pressed sandwiches, basic salads and a variety of side dishes (small \$2.99, large \$5.99), many based on recipes from Astruc's mother, who is of Spanish heritage.

Equally appealing is Verde's approach to wine. During a phone call after my visit, Mitchell explained that he mixes a core list of 10 to 12 wines (\$9.99-\$22.99 a bottle) with a rotating selection of organic and lesser known varietals to keep things interesting.

Currently, options include **Domaine Tariquet Sauvignon Blanc** (\$13.99), Ardales Organic Tempranillo (\$12.99) and a 2002 Rentas de Fincas Rioja Reserva (\$22.99). But Friday wine tastings from 5 to 8 p.m. allow customers to try new options, along with a tasty sample of Verde's tapas.

From the glass case, we selected the chicken pesto panino, beef and mushroom panino, chicken Caesar wrap and club salad (all \$6.99), along with shrimp and corn chowder and chicken salad (both \$2.99).

Both panini were served on sturdy bread, boasting fresh-from-the-press grill marks and a nice crunch. While I found the chicken pesto more spirited, the beef was fork-tender and the mushrooms surprisingly zesty, thanks to garlic marinade.

The Caesar wrap overflowed with moist, seasoned chicken and crisp romaine lettuce. However, it was the side of house-made Caesar dressing that made it irresistible.

The club salad was a letdown -- a plastic container of mostly iceberg lettuce and a few mixed greens interspersed with Cheddar and Serrano ham. Though our choice of house-made blue cheese dressing was excellent, I was surprised at how lackluster it was overall.

However, the chowder and side of chicken salad made up for our meal's one letdown. Overloaded with corn and tender shrimp, the chowder's creaminess was cut with a nice peppery bite.

Verde's chicken salad was the perfect balance of chicken and robust spices, bound together by just a touch of mayo light yet deftly seasoned.

Even though Verde is a counter-service establishment, we weren't overlooked by the lone employee running the show. He was cordial when we ordered, answering any questions we had, and attentive as we ate, bringing an ice bucket for our bottle of wine.

Even if you don't work in Innsbrook, give Verde a try. The drive from downtown isn't far when satisfying sandwiches and a good bottle of vino await.