

Good to Go

Cheesetique in Alexandria



Jill Erber makes panini with bresaola, cheese and apples. (By Jonathan Ernst For The Washington Post)

The economy is on the ropes, and far too many of us are saving money by eating at our desks. If you're lucky enough to work in or around Del Ray, takeout from Cheesetique is worth the splurge.

This jewel of a cheese shop, which opened in 2004, is well known in the neighborhood and beyond. On any given day, there are dozens of cheeses in stock and a selection of cured meats. This year, owner Jill Erber moved the shop to a larger space and opened a casual wine bar with elegant cheese and charcuterie boards plus salads and sandwiches. Everything except the baked mac 'n' cheese -- it's better fresh and warm -- is available to go. Call in advance to order, or browse the cheese and condiments while you wait. At busy times, an order can take 10 minutes to prepare.

The biggest hit among our tasters was the Gourmet Panini (\$9.50). It's an intriguing combination of bresaola (air-dried beef), aged Irish cheddar, red apples and honey mustard grilled between two slices of multigrain bread. With a hint of spice (a little cinnamon, perhaps?), it manages to be a culinary thrill and comforting, too.

Sticking with the Italian theme, we also loved the Street Cleaner (\$9.50), an upscale sub with two kinds of salami, aged pecorino cheese, roasted yellow peppers and marinated artichokes. The ciabatta bread is firm enough to stand up to the filling but soft enough to be easy to chow down on.

For something light, there are delicate fig and brie crostini (\$6) or a creamy quiche (\$9) studded with Purple Haze goat cheese (one of my favorites, hands down), prosciutto and marinated artichokes, and served with a small green salad.

The only item we wouldn't recommend was the Mediterranean salad (\$9.50). Not that it wasn't good. In fact, we especially liked the surprising cinnamon balsamic vinaigrette. But for the price, it was an awfully meager portion. And it doesn't show off the best of what Cheesetique has to offer. Or justify a much-desired splurge.

Jane Black

Cheesetique 2411 Mount Vernon Ave., Alexandria, 703-706-5300, <http://www.cheesetique.com>. Hours: lunch, Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Sundays, noon-2:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesdays through Thursdays, 5-9 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 5-10 p.m.