

LOCAL TASTES

Creative, Flavorful Sandwiches Are Breadwinners for Three Local Shops

By DOMENICA MARGHETTI
Special to The Washington Post

If we pretty much abandoned the hope of getting a true New York-style deli sandwich around here. You know, mile-high, densely stacked, hot, juicy pastrami on chewy, tangy rye.

But that doesn't mean a good sandwich, even a deli sandwich, can't be had in Northern Virginia. A handful of new places that feature sandwiches, panini, wraps and the like have opened in the area in the past year.

I decided to check out three that caught my eye—Nickell's & Scheffler in Old Town and Café Poulet and Steff's Sandwich Sensations, both on Wilson Boulevard in Arlington.

NICKELL'S & SCHEFFLER

Chef-owners Louis Nickell and Susan Scheffler are classic examples of mid-career changers. He was a laid-off plant manager, she a bored banker. Both ended up at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, where they met, fell in love and honed their cooking skills.

They landed in Northern Virginia when Scheffler took a job in the kitchen of the Marriott hotel at Dulles International Airport. But their dream, she said, was to have a place that would allow them to exercise culinary creativity.

"That's what we've tried to do here," Scheffler said. "We're always asking, 'What can we do that's fresh, that's interesting?' We always like to have something on the menu that's going to be a little different."

Their creative touches turn up in sandwiches, such as the grilled chicken breast panino, which is dressed with mild, buttery brie and whole basil leaves, as well as in other dishes, such as blanched asparagus with wasabi mayonnaise and—new on the summer menu—a watermelon salad with red onion, kalamata olives and feta cheese.

Customers can build their own sandwiches by choosing from a selection of house-roasted meats, grilled vegetables and such and adding a choice of cheese, dressing and garnish.

In addition to sandwiches, Nickell's & Scheffler features about a dozen gourmet to-go items by the pound. Offerings change every two weeks, but some mainstays include barbecue ribs, savory tart (a light, custardy corn tart on the day I tried it) and marinated grilled vegetables. I only wish the chefs were less timid with their seasonings. The two soups I tried, black bean and tomato basil, both tasted flat, and more than once I've had to salt my sandwich. Desserts, on the



Louis Nickell, left, and Susan Scheffler, chefs and owners of Nickell's & Scheffler in Old Town Alexandria, serve up a tasty menu, including, clockwise from left: chicken breast and brie panino; rosemary lemonade; strawberry cobbler; and sandwiches, such as ham and Swiss, and roast beef and cheddar. The sandwich shop also offers gourmet items to go.



with yogurt dressing. All are good, particularly the pulled chicken, dressed with a slightly sweet barbecue sauce and served hot, topped with melted cheddar, on a large, soft sesame seed bun.

The chicken itself is also for sale (\$7.99 for the whole bird or \$10.99 with french fries and coleslaw), and if you're going for the quarter-bird, you can choose light or dark meat (\$4.99 for a quarter-bird of white meat or \$4.79 for dark).

"I am a chicken fan myself," said Jvriinat, whose family owns several delis and coffee shops in the San Francisco Bay area. He moved to this area four years ago after falling in love with Washington during a visit.

You don't have to stick with chicken to get a good sandwich at Café Poulet. The place makes a delicious flank steak wrap, with roasted peppers, onions and a

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Other nice touches: Iced coffee and iced tea are brewed and then chilled, rather than poured hot over ice; the lemonade is infused with rosemary and the hot chocolate with mint.

- **Address:** 1028 King St., Alexandria.
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- **Web site:** www.nsfinefood.com.
- **Hours:** 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday; closed Sunday.