



PHOTOS BY DAYNA SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Susan Scheffler and Louis Nickell serve gourmet takeout at their Old Town cafe, including salads, above, and a summer fruit crisp, below.

## Nickell's & Scheffler in Alexandria

When Louis Nickell and Susan Scheffler opened their comfortable corner cafe and carryout in Old Town six years ago, the career-changing couple had recent degrees from the Culinary Institute of America under their belts and the desire to create a neighborhood place with gourmet food to go.

"We made pistachio pesto with grilled salmon," Scheffler says. "And farro. People were asking, 'What is that?' Now they trust us" — and they know what the Italian grain is, thanks to word-of-mouth advertising and a more food-savvy, loyal clientele. Past the counter in front, there is a sunny space with seating for 24 or a (standing) cocktail party for 50, on the days a catered event takes place.

So husband and wife walk a short few blocks to work, and make entrees, salads, sandwiches and desserts that qualify as a cut above. Much of the menu changes weekly, depending on which ingredients Scheffler finds at the farmers markets. She, Nickell and their well-trained staff cook food they are proud of.

That translates to a nice supply of vegetarian and vegan dishes and chilled soups, in addition to Nickell's meats, which are roasted in-house for sandwiches and panini (\$6.25 and \$6.55). Recent offerings included a clean-tasting mango soup with lime (eight ounces, \$2.80; 12 ounces, \$3.80), an edamame salad with ginger-scallion dressing (\$8 per pound) and zucchini pancakes with mint (\$2.95 each). The summer salad struck a nice balance with its mixed greens, prosciutto, goat cheese, grilled nectarines, blueberries, toasted almonds and a maple balsamic vinaigrette (\$6.75).

There are some standards and signature dishes, including a garlicky gazpacho (same soup price) and rosemary lemonade (16 ounces, \$2.25), made throughout the

summer. The drink is refreshing and not overly sweet, with a light herb essence that hits the nose before each sip. Baked crab cakes with roasted red pepper sauce (\$4.25 each) are a house specialty. They are slightly salty, made with generous amounts of backfin and lump meat. Nickell's house chicken salad (\$12.99 per pound) is a keeper, with thyme, dried cherries, toasted walnuts and big chunks of perfectly poached breast meat.

Scheffler's desserts are standouts. Last



week's menu featured individual lime creme brulees (\$2.95) and summer fruit crisps with pecans (\$3.25), as well as terrific strawberry cupcakes (\$2 each) that contained a puree of the fresh berries in both the moist cake and the pale pink frosting.

Although it seems that the cafe's closing time is on the early side during the week, Nickell and Scheffler found that staying open later did not draw significantly more business. They are happy to take orders by phone and have them ready for pickup.

—Bonnie S. Benwick

■ **Nickell's & Scheffler** 1028 King St., Alexandria, 703-549-5545; [www.nsfinefood.com](http://www.nsfinefood.com). Hours: Mondays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Fridays, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Know where to find great takeout food? E-mail us at [food@washpost.com](mailto:food@washpost.com).