

► Vicinity & Beyond

Modena Wine Café (and Coffeehouse)

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You know a place is good when strangers dining at outdoor tables spontaneously tell you how good the food is as you're walking by. This is especially interesting because Christine Hollenbeck, "the

big cheese" (as her business card reads), didn't plan on making food a primary focus. "We thought it would be all about the wine," she said, but "the chef we hired is fantastic."

Eli Wiggs, the chef—or gastronome extraordinaire, as his business card reads—had previously worked at Sugarbeet in Longmont, but he was looking to spread his wings and create his own dishes. When he asked what Modena was looking for, Hollen-

beck told him, "I don't care, as long as it tastes good."

On a recent visit, Modena was serving a ceviche appetizer for \$11.50, a French grilled cheese sandwich made with prosciutto, brie, apples, and arugula, along with a small side salad for \$9, and a seared scallop plate served with a Haystack Mountain goat cheese fondue, roasted beets, shallots, and Brussels sprouts for \$18. Also on

the menu are crepes—both sweet and savory—for \$7.

Another stroke of food genius was hiring Jordan Sanders, a 19-year-old pastry chef who comes to work every morning at 6 a.m. to bake all the bread used in the café, along with the delectable pastries.

Hillary Patterson, the "queen bean," runs the coffee side of the café, and Hollenbeck described her

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LEFT HAND VALLEY COURIER

Modena Wine Café has outdoor seating along Long's Peak Avenue and Coffman Street in Longmont.



Photo by Donna Currie

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as one of the most cheerful people she'd ever met. Jamison Clark, the "wine Jedi," who previously worked at the Hotel Boulderado, manages the 150 different wines that are available by the glass.

"It's amazing," Hollenbeck said. "How did I end up with these people?"

Besides having a great staff, Hollenbeck relies on technology to enable her to serve so many different wines. High-tech stoppers and a fancy wine-dispensing system use argon gas to keep the wines in pristine condition, whether they cost \$4-per-glass or \$85-per-glass.

"There are a lot in the middle range," said Hollenbeck, who wants to make wine-drinking affordable. And if you're not sure what you like, there are flights of wines you can sample—or create your own flight—or 2-ounce taste—to decide which ones you like the best.

The staff gets training on the food and wine offered each day, but customers' preferences come before strict pairings. "We want to be fun," she said. "We don't want to be pretentious—I don't want to be snobby."

Hollenbeck said she personally prefers wines that are pleasant, rather than those that have hints of leather, tobacco, or other funky flavors, and it seems that many customers agree. One of the most popular wines is Butternut

Chardonnay, a California wine with the surprising flavor of butterscotch—but it's not sweet.

Besides wine, you can choose beers from Oscar Blues or Left Hand Brewing, along with cocktails featuring local distilleries as well as a few select others.

On the coffee side, the beans come from Boulder Organic Coffee where "coffee is roasted to order for us," Hollenbeck said, so it's always fresh and always available for customers.

Prior to opening the café, Hollenbeck had traveled a lot for work and she liked spending time in wine and coffee bars, but she didn't see anything similar locally.

"I wanted one," she said, so she talked it over with her husband. "He's an engineer," she said, and he approached it with spreadsheets and diagrams. He finally said, "I can't make it not work, honey," so the couple decided to launch the new business.

Hollenbeck's previous career was in food safety. She did hands-on training, wrote manuals, created online classes, and worked with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and even now works with the FDA writing food safety codes.

Prior to that, she worked in restaurants in more hands-on roles. "I decided I didn't want to sit in front of a computer," she said. She was looking for more active work, and the wine bar seemed like a perfect way to get back onto the floor.

Although the business is still very new, Hollenbeck is already making plans for the future, including wine- and food-pairing classes, and other wine-centric events where customers can learn the importance of where the grapes come from.

A fireplace is the focal point in a cozy area with comfortable seating. The warmth in the décor ought to be a popular destination as the weather chills. "We want people to hang out," Hollenbeck said. She said they won't focus on turning tables—instead, they want folks to be comfortable lingering and chatting over a glass of wine.

Modena Wine Café is located at 600 Longs Peak Ave., Unit H, in Longmont. For more information, call 720-438-7410 or visit www.modenawinecafe.com.