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Amazon Fresh's 'just walk out' tech makes this shopper wary

By Sondra Anzalone
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Don't touch" was my mantra during a recent visit to the new Amazon Fresh grocery store in Manassas. Apparently, if one of my three small children touched anything—and didn't put it back exactly where it belonged—I'd be charged for it. I don't need that stress. Granted, "Don't touch anything" has been my mantra since the pandemic began, but this is almost less controllable.

As if the fear of unauthorized purchases wasn't anxiety inducing enough, the eyes in the sky were creeping me out. There were cameras and scanners everywhere. Just look up, and you'll see one every 12 to 18 inches. At one point, I almost considered grabbing some aluminum foil for a tin hat.

I took a deep breath and continued pushing the lime green shopping cart down the aisles. My 6- and 8-year-old had pleaded for the compact, two-level, fluorescent orange option, but it didn't have a seat with leg holes for our toddler. For those who are curious about shopping carts, there's no miniature-vehicle-shaped option like at other grocery stores. But Amazon Fresh's carts have smartphone holders and flashy strips along the edge that help the store monitor purchases. The full-size shopping cart holds approximately 135 combined pounds of kids before feeling like it will tip over.

The new Amazon Fresh grocery store in Manassas opened in June at 7807 Sudley Road, near the Sky Zone trampoline park. It is one of three Amazon Fresh stores opening in Northern Virginia this summer, and, at 45,000 square feet, it is the area's largest. Other stores are opening in Lorton and Arlington.

The Manassas store feels like a hybrid between a conventional grocery store and a warehouse; it's definitely not like a Whole Foods Market, which is also owned by Amazon, despite some of its "365 brand" grocery items. During my visit around 10:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning, the hot foods stations were not yet open, and several specialty cold sections, such as the olive bar and seafood department, were closed.

When I noticed the \$4.97 rotisserie chicken station was empty, I made a mental note that I'll keep buying the \$4.99 rotisserie chicken at Costco down the street. It may be 2 cents more but at least it's ready by 10 a.m.

A friendly man was just starting to make sushi when I walked by. He made me miss the dine-in, mini restaurant options I love at Whole Foods Markets. Even if I did buy the freshly prepared sushi, there was no-

where to eat it in the store ... unless you count the few tables with chairs outside that were occupied with what appeared to be a staff meeting.

The bakery department was scant and remiss of the beautiful cakes and other confections found at the Whole Foods Market in Fairfax. It wasn't until I got home that I realized the pre-packaged "fresh" brand of mini cupcakes my children coerced me into buying were six days past the sell-by date.

When I saw that the "international, bean, and rice" aisle began with a row of Hamburger Helper, I lost hope that this store could compete with the real international stores a few blocks away. The \$5.49 dragon fruit in the produce section did look fresh, though.

The produce section reminded me of the nearby LIDL or ALDI whose fruits and vegetables remain in their original shipping containers. Amazon Fresh's, however, are all the exact same size and color, leaving me to believe that these cardboard boxes are tied into the weight-sensing technology used within the shelving systems.

The "beer, wine and spirits" section was sizable and well stocked. I'm not sure why "spirits" was on the sign though, as no liquor is available outside of Virginia ABC stores. Also, I'm also curious to know how they verified that I'm of legal drinking age when no ID was checked when I purchased a case of cold beer. The minimum age to have an Amazon Prime account is 18, according to their service agreement; this leaves an obvious age gap if the store is relying on its technology to keep underage consumers from buying alcohol.

I'll be the first to admit I'm not super-techy, but I was able to use my smartphone to generate the "in-store code" from my Amazon app to easily enter and exit the store. As someone who still reviews paper statements in the mail, imagine my frustration when I didn't see a grand total or receipt when I scanned to exit. I still can't verify that I bought cold beer and expired cupcakes. (Yup, just beer and cupcakes.) Maybe I could've used the in-store "Ask Alexa" feature to figure it all out.

When I asked for proof of purchase, the friendly gentleman at "walk out" said other customers had experienced similar frustration, and he handed me a \$10 coupon for a future trip. I plan to use it during later store hours to try the hot prepared foods. Hopefully, they don't disappoint because it's the only thing that I would consider returning to try. There's no other draw for me—the prices weren't super competitive, and it was far from a worry-free ex-

perience. It seems Amazon Fresh's selling point is "just walk out," but they need more if they're expecting folks to walk back in.

According to an Amazon Fresh spokeswoman Laura Hayes, whom I contacted after my shopping trip, the store's "standard protocol" is to have a store employee check customers' identification when they enter the alcoholic beverages aisle. Also, she called the expired cupcakes "completely unacceptable" and offered a refund. Finally, the missing receipt should have been emailed to me or listed in the "your orders" section of the Amazon website, she said.

The store's hours are 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. An Amazon returns center is available inside, and an electric vehicle charging station is opening soon outside the entrance. Delivery and drive-up are also available, like almost everywhere else now, thanks to COVID.

If you would prefer to shop the traditional way (or don't have an

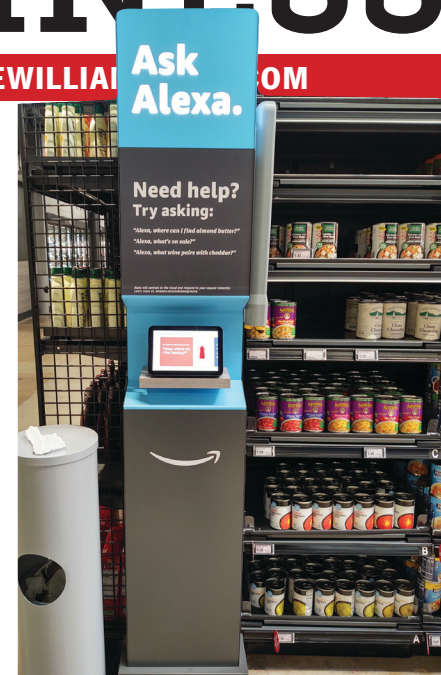


PHOTO BY SONDRAN ANZALONE.

Amazon Fresh opened at 7807 Sudley Road in Manassas in June. Among the store's high-tech features is an "Ask Alexa" station, ready to answer customers' questions.

Amazon Prime account and want to shop in-store anyway), simply bypass the scanner upon arrival and use a checkout lane with human attendants when you're done. Bring a sweatshirt, it's cold inside.

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The Amazon Fresh that opened June 9 in Manassas is Northern Virginia's largest at 45,000 square feet.



Shopping carts at Amazon Fresh have smartphone holders and computerized equipment that help the store monitor purchases.

Craftworx Taproom invites patrons to pour their own

New Gainesville brewery offers lots of choices without the wait

By Sondra Anzalone
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Walk in to CraftWorx Taproom at 5615 Wellington Drive in Gainesville, and the first thing you'll notice is a wall of beer taps. Sixty to be exact. Show your ID, get a pour card, and enjoy the experience of "no beer pressure" while you sample as many varieties as you wish.

What is self pour? It means never waiting for a drink, says CraftWorx owner Chris McCarrick, who got the idea of opening a self-pour taproom after visiting a similar establishment years ago with a friend after a concert. The buddies noticed that although the Charlottesville place was busy, they didn't have to flag down a bartender or wait for a drink — they simply got whatever they wanted themselves. Even on nights after Jiffy Lube Live concerts, McCarrick said, "There can be a couple hundred guests, and no one is waiting for a drink."

How it works: When patrons walk in, their IDs are checked, and a credit card is swiped to open a tab. The ID and credit card are returned, and an individual pour card is given. The pour card allows patrons to access the taps and monitor their tab in real time.

Each tap has a digital screen labeled with the beer's name, type, brewery source, alcohol beverage volume (ABV) and price per ounce. Once selected for consumption, a screen displays the volume poured and price each time the card is used. When they're done, visitors simply drop the cards into a tip box.

"It's great for big groups," McCarrick says, "because there's no worry about splitting checks." Everyone buys whatever they want for themselves and can buy rounds for each other—just be sure you don't leave your card in the slot, or you could end up buying a stranger's drink.

If a certain consumption level is reached, the card will need to be reactivated by an employee so that a sobriety check can be performed for safety.

What's on the wall? More than beer. Of the 60 taps available, the first 52 are devoted to beer. The first 20 beers are always local; regional beers are next. And if you don't like craft beer, there are a couple national brands at the end of the line too—as well as wine, ciders, seltzers and cocktails.

A WiskyWorx bar at the end of the tap wall features dozens of liquors for those who want to order mixed drinks. There's also an endless \$1.75 self-serve soda station for nonalcoholic beverages.

"I wanted there to be something



PHOTOS BY SONDRAN ANZALONE.

Each tap is numbered, and a screen offers information about each beer, including its name, type, brewery source, ABV and price per ounce.

for everyone here," said McCarrick. "I hate when I go to a winery with friends, and the only other thing available besides wine is water."

When asked how the beers are selected, McCarrick said that "it's a bit of a dance." He wants to give breweries the opportunity to showcase different options throughout the year. Because it's summer, there are more fruity beers and sours currently. In the winter, a couple more stouts than usual will be featured. A caramel macchiato stout that "tastes like candy" is on tap now, he said.

McCarrick said he wants customers to be able to try IPAs, pilsners, stouts, lagers, sours and more. Because so much information is available on the screens, and customers can pour however much or little they want, they can experience a variety of beers.

"You're more connected to the beer you pour," McCarrick explains, "and I want to offer a unique experience for people know more about it."

There's no pressure for customers to order something hastily or be stuck with a large glass of something they don't enjoy. McCarrick is considering tasting nights and other events for patrons to learn more. Want to see what's on tap before you go? Follow CraftWorx on UNTAPPD.

What else is on tap? Food, theme nights and more. With a full kitchen and liquor license, CraftWorx offers more than many traditional breweries. They open every day at noon and feature barbeque from District BBQ in Bristow. Vegetarian options and a kids menu are also available for indoor and outdoor dining. To order food, scan the QR code at your table.

CraftWorx offers various theme nights throughout the week, like trivia on Wednesdays and karaoke on Thursdays. The newest weekly addition is live jazz on Mondays. Check its Facebook page for comedy nights and live bands to hit the stage on weekends.

A four-station dart board wall, video games and board games are always up for grabs. With free WiFi and a number of plush seating options up front, there's also the option for a relaxing remote workstation.

CraftWorx also offers parking for Jiffy Lube Live concerts. It's three-quarters of a mile or about a 15-minute walk through the VIP parking lot, says McCarrick. Customers also like to wait here for their Uber rides, he adds.

What's next?

CraftWorx opened in November 2021, and McCarrick is still making plans for the space. He said he wants to convert the existing DJ booth to more taps. "I want to put 10 taps in for mixed drinks," he said. He's also using the space next door for overflow during concert nights or private events with catering.

McCarrick said he also wants to use the additional space for his own nano brewing where he can concoct two-barrel experimental beers. He's discussed the idea with local microbrewers to see

Craftworx Taproom, which opened last November in Gainesville, offers lots of seating for beer tasting and meals.

if they'd like to collaborate in his space since it offers them less risk.

"When you're a small brewery and you make one beer someone doesn't like, they may associate that beer with the brand and never try them again," McCarrick said. "That's high risk for them. Here, we could get funky."

Reach Sondra Anzalone at news@fauquier.com

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'Bolay' set to open Nov. 17 in Gainesville

Florida-based restaurant chooses Virginia Gateway for its 2nd location in the state

By Sondra Anzalone
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bolay, a new restaurant that puts an American spin on customizable bowl-style meals that are both gluten- and nut-free, is set to open Nov. 17 in the Virginia Gateway in Gainesville.

"It's not ethnic food," says Paul Paterno, operating partner of the new Gainesville restaurant.

Bolay is a fast-casual restaurant where customers can build their own custom meals with oven roasted greens and grains; proteins like chicken, seafood or tofu; and layers of flavor. "All of the menu items complement each other," Paterno said.

Unlike other chains where diners can sometimes end up with a mess of stuff, "There isn't a single combination that isn't going to be fabulous after you build your custom 'bol,'" he added.

Some of Paterno's favorite items are the medi-



Bolay offers bowl-type meals with an American twist. The restaurant is completely nut- and gluten-free.



The new Bolay restaurant at the Virginia Gateway shopping center in Gainesville.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS

um rare steak, chimichuri tomatoes and balsamic mushrooms.

The vegetable options change with the seasons to ensure the freshest selections, he said.

Bases include "forbidden black rice" and warm Asian sweet potato noodles, which contain no flour. Everything on the menu is gluten-free—even the cookies and wraps.

Furthermore, Paterno says "people with gluten sensitivities don't need to worry" when they eat

at Bolay; employees are prohibited from bringing it into the building. It's a total gluten-free zone to avoid any potential cross contamination.

The restaurant also uses no tree nuts to further help customers with allergies.

"Our pesto is made with sunflower seeds instead of pine nuts; it's really delicious," he says. "There's also no butter or a fryer in the restaurant. ... We just use a little oil when roasting," says Paterno.

There are dairy options, such as goat cheese and parmesan, that guests can enjoy. A menu detailing every ingredient is available upon request.

"Food is fuel, and when you eat at Bolay, you get the nutrients you need to fuel your body," says Paterno. "People are busier than ever, and I think they're really going to enjoy having a healthy and delicious option to feed their families."

The restaurant will strive to help the community and is holding various events during its opening week to honor public servants, such as police officers, firefighters, teachers, active-duty military and veterans.

Speaking of Veterans, every Bolay features a wooden American flag in its restaurant, handmade by a veteran. There is also a 20% discount for veterans, police and fire and rescue staff every day of the week.

"It's very important to give back to the community and be involved," Paterno said.

Bolay also plans to donate fresh food leftovers to local agencies that fight hunger and food waste, such as the House of Mercy, the Prince William Food Rescue program and local food banks.

Paterno has 36 years in the restaurant business. He spent 15 years as the food and beverage director for Hilton Hotels in Alexandria and Washington, D.C., but that career ended when COVID struck. He transitioned into the ever-growing fast casual food scene by joining Bolay, he explained.

Bolay is not a franchise. Bolay has 25 locations in Florida and is looking to open 100 restaurants in the next five years, says Paterno.

Virginia's first location opened recently in Falls Church, and a third is planned to open in Fairfax.

Bolay is located at 5035 Wellington Road in Gainesville in the Virginia Gateway shopping center. Its space was formerly Zoës Kitchen (and prior to that, Pei Wei). It sits catty-corner to Chick-fil-A and Chipotle.

Sign up for the VIP week for a FREE "bol" or wrap opening week at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/bolay-gainesville-virginias-vip-week-tickets-344790446507>

Local economy is 'stable,' county's economic development office says

Staff Reports

Despite the national discussion about the threat of a recession, as well as the cooling of the local housing market, Prince William County's economy continues to show signs of overall growth and stability, according to a recent report of local economic activity released by Prince William County's Department of Economic Development.

Business growth

Prince William County added more 160 businesses during the first quarter of 2022, bringing the average number of businesses in the county to 10,421. That's a 7% increase over the same period a year ago, the report said.

Hospitality

The average hotel occupancy rate in September 2022 was 67%, which is on par with the pre-pandemic level of 67.5% in September 2019, the report said.

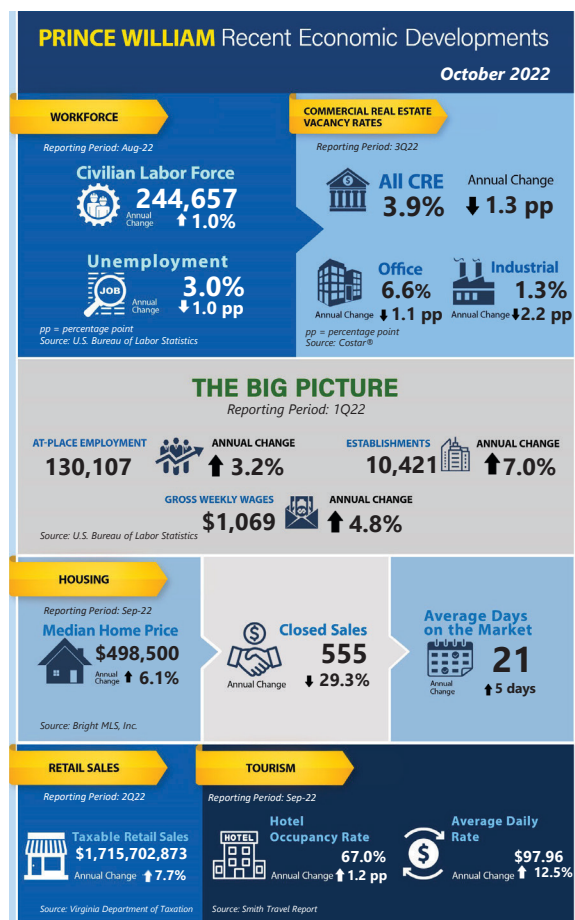
Unemployment

Prince William County's labor force contracted in August 2022 when nearly 3,000 workers exited the workforce. The county's unemployment rate also ticked upward in August 2022 to 3% but remained a full percentage point lower than it was a year ago.

Residential real estate

The county's housing market continues to show signs of cooling off, which is consistent with regional and national trends, the report says.

In September, the median home price fell for the third consecutive month to \$498,500 from \$506,050 in the previous month. Reduced ac-



SOURCE: PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY OFFICE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

tivity was also reflected in an almost 30% year-over-year decline in closed sales and an increase in average days on the market, the report said.