



## Happy Belly on Vine (Review)

Happy Belly on Vine has gorgeous ingredients but could use more spice

BY KRISTEN FRANKE · AUGUST 13TH, 2014 · DINER



*Happy Belly on Vine - Photo: Jesse Fox*

Walking into new Over-the-Rhine breakfast/lunch spot Happy Belly on Vine, you may find yourself wishing you had just come from yoga. There are living plants on the walls, the wooden tabletops are artfully crafted and the list of clean-eating ingredients display proudly on the large, hanging roll of brown butcher paper is lacking anything that would dare make your belly less happy — it even smells healthy in there. Though seating is at a minimum, the space is beautiful and just spacious enough for the kind of grab-and-concept owner Molly Reckman and co-owner/sister-in-law Abby Reckman, a food and nutrition sciences graduate from the University of Cincinnati, hope to accomplish.

It is this concept that brought the Reckmans and their team to Vine Street. They wanted to be a part of the exciting atmosphere in the area while holding down a spot just a block away from picnic-friendly Washington Park.

“Our goal is to make eating healthy quick and convenient,” Molly says. “We [offer] grab-and-go items that are made fresh every morning for [those] who ... would like a quick meal without having to go the fast-food route.”

The Reckmans have already immersed themselves in the area’s vibrant food scene by sourcing their meats, cheeses and spices from Findlay Market. Happy Belly also offers gluten-free options from local bakery Elephant Bread.

The experience at Happy Belly begins at the counter. With a display case on the left piled high with wraps and salads, the to-go concept is immediately apparent. We chose Mel’s Chicken Wrap (\$8) and the Basil Hummus Wrap (\$6.75) from the grab-and-go

menu, intrigued by the idea of Greek yogurt in an avocado spread and basil in hummus.

Wraps are not the prettiest when covered in cellophane and stacked like cylindrical bricks, so we could not help but feel disappointed when they were handed to us — plastic wrap and all — without plates. I am all for a picnic, but it did feel strange opening the wrap at a bare wooden table, no matter how adorably the table was decorated.

My first bite of the chicken wrap confirmed one thing: Happy Belly's dedication to quality. I can only assume this chicken, sourced from Busch's Country Corner at Findlay Market, lived a comfortable, steroid-free life, as it was delicious and extremely fresh. The avocado spread, though wanting for salt, was creamy and delightful as well. A quick smooch of a panini press couldn't hurt, but the creamy combination of ingredients hit the spot.

Where the chicken wrap succeeded, the basil hummus wrap fell flat. Incredibly fresh, yes, but the small amount of hummus and the overwhelming amount of shredded carrots left us feeling like we were eating a dry salad. Creating a veggie wrap that pleases both carnivorous and vegetarian palates is challenging in itself, but the key to making a good one is including an ingredient that pulls all those vegetables together to create a savory, interesting bite. Maybe a more generous dollop of hummus and more seasoning will bring this wrap into a less rabbit-friendly category.

Our other lunch choices proved to have flavor issues as well. The Sweet Potato Burger (\$6.50), though toasty, delicious-smelling and crafted with care, was topped with yellow mustard, which not only overpowered the subtle flavors in the burger but also called for a far less healthy type of fast food. I found myself craving a light aioli to moisten the sandwich. Instead, I was left with that just-ate-a-hotdog taste in my mouth; a taste I am sure Happy Belly wants to avoid.

I washed down my burger with the Foundation smoothie (\$6.50). Molly and her team describe it as one of their favorite items on the menu, but the smoothie gods were not on their side during my visit. I make smoothies every morning, and there is just no escaping the smoothie-ruining effect of an unripe banana. No matter how nutrient-rich and packed with spinach, kale and sweet apple the Foundation may have been, all I tasted was green banana. Perhaps a small spoonful of agave nectar could have made up for the lack of ripeness?

In the end, I left Happy Belly feeling like I had done good things for my body but had sacrificed taste in the process. Though the restaurant has sworn off butter, refined sugar and white flour, I do not see why salt, spice, health(ier) fats like olive oil and low-carb options like agave cannot be added to bring their gorgeous ingredients to life. Though this restaurant fills a void in the OTR food scene by providing well-crafted, healthy, locally sourced items for urbanites on the go, I hope that the food starts to cater more effectively to those who want to *experience* their nutrients, not just gulp them down.

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**Happy Belly on Vine**

**Go:** 1344 Vine St., Over-the-Rhine;

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