

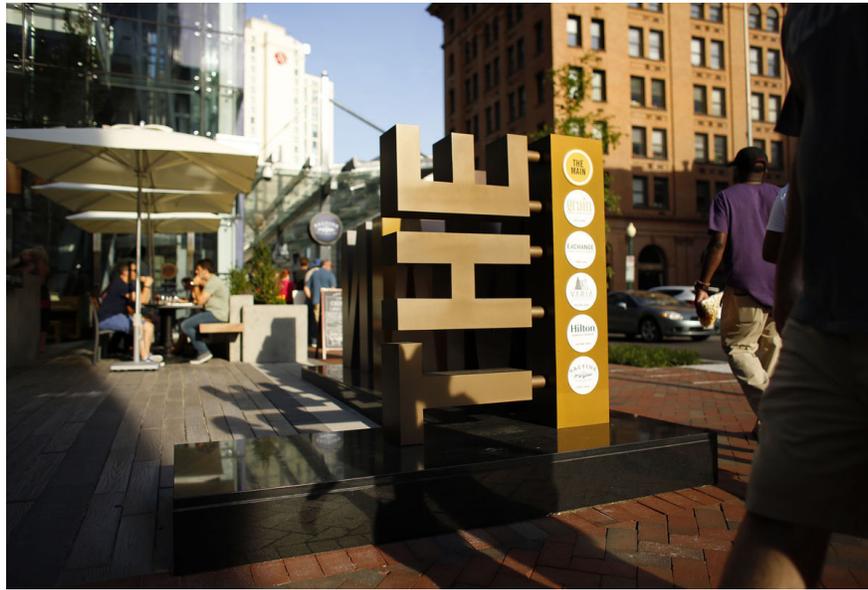
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Saltine, Varia and Grain: What to expect when you go to The Main for dinner and drinks.

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Stephen M. Katz | The Virginian-Pilot

Diners enjoy Thursday, June 29, 2017, evening's beautiful weather in Norfolk at The Main's street-level restaurant, Saltine.



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The Main, the new Norfolk downtown hotel and conference center, opened in March.



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The Main, with an over 42,000-square-foot, city-owned conference center, is expected to bring in at least \$2 million in direct tax revenue, Norfolk officials say.



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The Varia restaurant features two private dining rooms hidden behind a book case. As seen Monday, March 20, 2017.



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Books: 812. On the shelves of The Varia, an Italian restaurant. They will be custom made with purple, red and blue bindings. Yes, the books are real.

Attitude and elegance on steroids.

The Main is a fitting name for 22 stories of sparkling glass and steel that beckon from the corner of Main and Granby streets in downtown Norfolk.

Besides the jaw-dropping architecture and interiors, 300 guest rooms and 50,000 square feet of tricked-out, high-tech meeting space, The Main offers three new places for Hampton Roads thrill-seekers to dine, drink and socialize.

Here's a rundown of what to expect from each venue and what some of The Main's neighbors, and competitors, think about it.

Walk right off the street and into Saltine on the ground floor. With outdoor patio seating, Saltine is officially a part of the streetscape. Great idea.

A giant mermaid sculpture swims across the wall, wraps around the corner and disappears into the ceiling. The lounge area and dining rooms feel like an homage to the past, with exposed brick walls, black millwork, handsome glass globe lighting, mosaic tile floors and damask wallpaper. Seating capacity is an even 100.

Seafood is the star here. Enormous live lobsters await their fate in a tank by the hostess stand. Whole fish lie glistening on a bed of crushed ice in the fish-cutting area. Point to one you'd like and have it prepared your way. Like ceviche and poke? A server will prepare your order tableside from the ice trolley.

I walked in on a Saturday afternoon and sat at the bar. The barback handed me a menu while I waited to order from the bartender. I asked if they had soft-shells and was told no. (That's a big disappointment during soft-shell season at a seafood place.) I then asked if she had a menu for Grain upstairs. She said no and suggested I look it up on my

phone. (How about, “Wait a moment while I get you one”?)

At nighttime, the younger crowd hangs on the patio or close to the bar to see and be seen and partake of craft cocktails. Those seeking a more private evening seem to gravitate inside for dinner.

From the wolf head to the honeycomb ceiling, baby grand piano and swanky wine bar, Varia is a gorgeous contender for your Italian dining dollar. White and purple reign supreme in the main and private dining rooms, which offer breakfast, lunch and dinner.

My pals joined me on a Friday evening at Varia’s Wolf Wine Bar and Lounge. A jazzy female vocalist crooned over the chatter. We landed great seats out front at the long communal table facing all incomers. Our wood-fired pizza with pear, arugula and goat cheese was a hit. Nice touches abound – like the table decoration of fresh artichoke, rosemary and grape leaf, and the young woman handing out large glasses of water and returning to keep them filled.

A young executive sat in a wing chair in the hall area, sipping a glass of vino and squeezing in some overtime on his laptop while a group of manicured and muscular young men in untucked dress shirts gathered around the cool white counters next to the self-serve Cruvinet. Four sporty young women in heels and tight, rolled-up jeans sat in the black vinyl booth contemplating their next move. Two white-haired couples sat nearby, tucked in the corner away from the crowds and the noise.

I spoke to Todd Jurich, whose eponymous bistro is nearby

(150 W. Main St. with a storefront around the corner on Boush Street). His restaurant gets recommended to larger parties when Varia's dining room can't accommodate.

"I have no doubt that The Main will succeed," Jurich said. "I know from experience it takes time to fine-tune a new establishment, finding the right staff for front and back of the house. We are fortunate to have such a world-class hotel in our region ."

The rooftop beer garden and adult playground on the fifth floor has what it takes to be the new "it" spot.

When we visited, groups had gathered around the outdoor fire pit on one patio. Most were lost in conversation, while others cast frequent glances at either their cellphones, the Elizabeth River or the stars.

While a solo musician strummed, thumped and sang hits on his guitar, a fierce competition of "Heads Up" was taking place among seven friends, with frequent bouts of name-calling and raucous laughter.

Couples chatted while waiting their turn to hop into the free photo booth. It occupies prime real estate in the main area and is covered in slightly curling strips of film of folks kissing, vogueing and mugging for the camera.

In the young crowd, shorts, flip-flops, sundresses, jeans and T-shirts dominated. A stylish young woman in a close-cropped Afro stood out as she walked through the crowd illuminated by her "beer light," the brilliant method of using your lit cellphone placed face up as a coaster under your

beverage.

A blue-haired girl and a heavily tattooed boy canoodled in the low couch. When one couple got out of the rooftop snuggle spot, another quickly jumped in.