



## Heart and Soul

Luca and Jessica Annunziata faced more than a few hurdles when they set out to open Passion8 Bistro in Fort Mill.

The building they purchased on Hwy. 51 just off Carowinds Boulevard dated back to the town's "Fort Vegas" days. Purple and turquoise covered the walls of five small rooms, and what wasn't painted Charlotte Hornets colors was mirrored. Poker chips and hands holding aces adorned the carpet.

Next came a "spa" that was busted for prostitution.

When a fried chicken joint took over, owners stapled linoleum over the carpet and installed the kitchen hood backwards so that greasy air blew back in rather than outside.



"It was a condemnable site," admits Jessica, who talked Luca into the site after he refused to look inside. "I sent my father pictures and he thought it was a practical joke. It had no heat, no air, no plumbing and a bad roof. We literally had to sand down the walls. It was hard, but I would do it again 100 times over. We created something with our own hands. It's our heart and soul."

It's easy to see that heart and soul in Passion8 Bistro today. A rich, red cabernet covers the walls of the cozy dining room with banquettes and freestanding tables. From fabric draped on the ceiling to pretty plates on the walls, there's something beautiful to see everywhere you look. Intimate and romantic, the small restaurant with just 60 seats oozes the passion and pure love of good food shared by this vibrant couple.

Luca grew up in Sorrento on the Mediterranean coast of southern Italy, the baby of a large family that operated a restaurant on the beach. Jessica is a second-generation girl from Queens who was raised in New York City with tight-knit ties to family and a strong work ethic. The two met when she was waiting tables and he was cooking in a restaurant on Fire Island, a seasonal escape for well-heeled Manhattanites.

By that time, Luca was already an established chef who had traveled the world aboard a Cunard cruise ship, prepared private luncheons for celebrities featured in Good Housekeeping magazine and worked as a private chef for founders of the Zagat restaurant guides. His resume included stints at restaurants at London's famed Dorchester Hotel and The Suvretta House in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

After 9-11, the couple moved to San Agata, Italy, where Luca worked in a three-star Michelin restaurant that grew or raised everything it served. Jessica soaked in the culture of Italy like focaccia dipped in olive oil.

"I fell in love with Italy's simpler way of life," she says. "People relish time at home, and what's really important to them is family. The good things in life are treasured."

Two years later, the couple returned to the United States to open their own restaurant. They looked at California, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico, taking six months to settle in Charlotte.

"It has always been our dream to own our own restaurant," says Luca. "I worked for corporate America for so many years and finally said that's enough. It's more work, but it's fun. I just love it."

In the 10 months it took to renovate the restaurant, the Annunzias realized they faced more than building obstacles. Folks around Fort Mill raised their eyebrows when they heard about the gourmet bistro with culinary influences from around the world. The Pepsi rep flat-out told the couple they'd never make it there if they didn't sell fried chicken and Mountain Dew.

"We were nervous, but we knew the quality of what we wanted to do," says Jessica. "We knew it was special and that eventually word of mouth about the food would bring people here. Now people are seeking us out. They're coming here for us, not just happening upon us because we're next to 150 other restaurants. That makes us really proud."

Passion8's menu changes twice a season to reflect the freshest local ingredients and dishes appropriate to the time of year. At just one page, it offers a few soups and salads, a handful of starters, two homemade pastas and six entrees.

Luca's recipes are based on traditional Italian dishes passed down through three generations of his family, but he adds his own creative twist with flavors and cooking techniques learned from his world travels.

Every day, Luca heads to the farmer's market for fresh ingredients that inspire his dishes. Local farmers provide mushrooms, watercress and apples, and fresh fruit preserves are made in house.

When I visited in November, the early winter menu featured traditional harvest flavors such as Roasted Butternut Squash soup (\$7), Pumpkin Gnocchi (\$19) and Ashleigh Farms Chicken Breast served with a pecan sweet potato tart (\$21).

We started with a delicious and filling bowl of the hearty and slightly spicy Potato Corn Chowder (\$8) and the Spring Roll Duet (\$10) served with honey peanut and ginger soy dipping sauces.

Next came Shrimp in Wonderland (\$22), a beautifully presented dish served in a vanilla spiced rum cream sauce with crispy pancetta and honey rosemary polenta spears.

My guest tried Chilean Sea Bass (\$26), encrusted with panko Japanese breadcrumbs and served with a shitake miso broth and seared tofu.

In between courses, bite-size creations from Chef Luca arrived at the table to give us a taste of more menu items.

Passion8 does a stellar job of catering to both gourmards and wanna-be foodies just beginning to learn the art of fine food. Plenty of basics are available – beef, veal and pork chops, for instance – but they're all prepared with a twist.

Filet Mignon (\$28) is served as two four-ounce filets with a fig compote, foie gras, herb roasted fingerling potatoes and watercress. The Niman Ranch French Cut Pork Chop (\$23) is pan-seared, topped with Boursin French cheese and served with jicama hash.

After eating her husband's culinary creations for 10 years, Jessica doesn't hesitate when I ask for her personal favorites.

"It would have to be Pumpkin Gnocchi (\$19)," she says. "It's very light. We make it with imported flour from Italy that's almost like talc and we cut it with pureed pumpkin instead of potato. They're like little pillows served with a Tunisian lamb sausage and a tiny bit of shallot cream."

Calamari Cubano (\$13), her favorite appetizer, blends Cuban, Italian and Japanese flavors.

"It's breaded with toasted Japanese panko bread crumbs, a little bit of jalapeno and a honey ponzu citrus butter made with lime juice we import from Japan," she says. "It's very light with an outside that's nice and crunchy. Calamari is supposed to be soft, not chewy, rubbery and tough."

The only constant throughout all the seasonal menu changes is the Passion8 Salad (\$8), an all-red dish of curly-leaf red lettuce, glazed red beets and red apples from the North Carolina mountains.

Pasta is made fresh every day at Passion8.

"It's very labor intensive," says Jessica. "On the last menu we had large tortellini with a different filling every day. Now we have agnellotti, the half-moon pasta, and the gnocchi, the little pillows. We typically make a set number for the night and if we run out, we make it to order."

Customers who are celebrating a special occasion often call on Luca for chef tasting menus, a 12-course progression of small dishes paired with wine, beer, cordials and other spirits.

"We do foie gras, sweet breads and other very interesting special foods that people don't get the opportunity to try all the time," says Jessica. "It allows Luca to be so creative."

Passion8 Bistro also offers cooking classes, wine dinners, movie nights, karaoke and a book club.

"We want people to feel very welcome, like they're having dinner with us in our living room," says Jessica. "This isn't a chain. And it isn't what we do. It's who we are. It's our dream come true."

Want to Go?

Passion8 Bistro 3415 S.C. 51 N., Fort Mill 803-802-7455

[www.Passion8Bistro.com](http://www.Passion8Bistro.com)

Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday-Friday for lunch and 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday for dinner.

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