

## The Passion's in the Food

Written by Jon Luther

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**Don't be fooled by the location -- this tiny bistro comes through with flavor**



There is a sign above the little bar at Passion8 Bistro that says "La Dolce Vita." It is a conspicuous reminder, and it is where my gaze settles as I put a forkful of stuffed zucchini blossom in my mouth. Crispy, herbaceous, and studded with chunks of lobster, it is a fresh addition to Luca and Jessica Annunziata's spring menu at Passion8 Bistro. Another sunny prospect (in color and flavor) is the chilled yellow tomato soup. It's a perfect complement to the upcoming warm days and evenings, as the promise of local summer vegetables becomes real again. And after experiencing the bistro's winter menu and overall charm on several previous visits, it is clear the Annunzias are heeding their own message of a life well lived.

Located just east of I-77 South, off Carowinds Boulevard on Highway 51, Passion8 is an unlikely venue for a restaurant. A former video poker parlor and (reputed) brothel, it is located in the bowels of a semidepressed industrial swath of low-slung buildings, sketchy storefronts, and a Bojangles. As you enter the parking lot, however, things improve. Amid the sweeping asphalt-and-power-line vistas, significant site improvements have been made, including a charming patio. The most jarring transformation is inside. A high ceiling in the cozy main dining room and bar area is covered by a billowing tapestry, which is illuminated by a twinkling chandelier. Deep reds and oranges abound. On a Thursday night an acoustic duo adds a nice ambience.

Co-owner Jessica manages the front of the house and sets the tone with a bright smile and quiet confidence. Her few servers follow in kind, providing warm, attentive service that is never rushed, overbearing, or syrupy. And what is not to be confident about? Chef Luca has paid his dues. Italian by birth, he left home at seventeen to work in London, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland in various hotels as well as in the famed Cunard cruise lines kitchens. And, while this vast experience has given him a broad palate to work with, at Passion8 his most successful dishes are American offerings that take advantage (as much as possible) of local farms.

The wine list is affordable (\$6 to \$11 by the glass; \$30 to \$60 by the bottle). Pleasant surprises include a Conti Neri

Prosecco (\$42) and the Delectus Argentum, a Napa blend. A favorite on the solid beer menu is the Smuttynose IPA from New Hampshire. A floral, hoppy nose gives way to a full body with a long, heady finish that matches well with an outstandingly tender and flavorful steak sandwich offered at lunch. Rare beef tenderloin with tangy boursin cheese and sweet vinegar peppers are stacked on a multigrain bun. I finish every bite. A pomodoro soup's bright acidity is balanced by deeply layered tomato flavors, accented nicely by crème fraîche and truffle oil. (I was so haunted by this soup that I made a batch—with moderate success—for a dinner party that weekend.) Also worth a try (if expensive for lunch at \$13) is the panko-crusted lobster cake sandwich. It's a nice change from the ubiquitous crab cake—tender and light, served with a tart and creamy shallot aioli.



The simple dinner menu is more formal than lunch and begins with an amuse-bouche, followed by warm bread and flavored olive oil. There are cheeses, two soups, and a handful of salads (\$7-\$8). Our favorite is the Passion8 Salad, with wintry glazed beets, apples, spiced walnuts, and brie. We ask about starters (\$11-\$14) and are disappointed as the server steers us toward the calamari. Nothing against this treatment—they are light and crispy and served with a sweet jalapeño butter—it's just that eating calamari is like eating fried rubber bands. I don't care where you go. In retrospect, I'm sure we would have liked either the pan-seared scallops or the eggplant rollatini more, but by the time we return, the menu has changed and I find myself jamming my face full of zucchini flowers. Such is (the good) life.

Entrées are \$22 to \$28 and feature six selections and two house-made pasta dishes (\$19 to \$21). A filet mignon is prepared perfectly and served atop a crisp potato cake that provides a familiar, comforting complement to the beef, with a port demi-glace holding it all together (replaced on the fall menu by a ribeye with sweet potato batonette, mushrooms, and goat cheese strudel). A Chilean sea bass receives an Asian treatment, swimming in a shimmering shiitake miso broth. There is also a Niman Ranch pork chop with jicama hash and a cranberry "agrodolce." Some minor annoyances exist, like the overuse of hydroponic microgreen watercress, which we often heap on the sides of our plates.

The Annunziatas' place is a bright spot in this unsightly section of Fort Mill. There is terrific food being served in a comfortable and friendly environment, and the owners have settled in to the space nicely. You know, that place right behind the Bojangles?

## Jon Luther's Favorite Dishes

### **Fried Zucchini Blossom**

\$14

Crispy stuffed zucchini with chunks of lobster and mascarpone

### **Pomodoro Soup**

\$5

Bright acid is balanced by deeply layered tomato flavors, complemented nicely by crème fraîche and truffle oil.

### **steak sandwich**

\$12

Rare beef tenderloin with tangy boursin cheese and sweet vinegar peppers stacked on a multigrain bun.

### **Passion8 Bistro**

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Fort Mill

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D (Tue-Sat), P, FSB.

[passion8bistro.com](http://passion8bistro.com)