

# Passions flare at Passion 8

By *Tricia Childress*

Published 08.25.09

When you get to **Passion 8 Bistro** -- and you really should if you adore out-of-the-way, owner-obsessed places -- this is what you do: Order the smoked duck and scallop carpaccio duet starter as soon as you get there. This one dish speaks to the kitchen and to the heart of the owners, Chef Luca and Jessica Annunziata. Is it the plum cherry chutney? Or the fact the scallops are perfection? Or that the dish is big-flavored and served in an itty bitty room that allows me to write this?

While not all dishes coming out of this kitchen are faultless, the attempt at creating a memorable place makes this bistro real and unexpected.

It used to be that if you built a better mousetrap, customers would beat a path to the door no matter where that door was. Restaurateurs used to subscribe to this. Legendary eateries like Le Français in Wheeling, Ill., became required pilgrimage. But during the past two decades, accessibility -- not remoteness -- has been the path to success for restaurants. Being in the center of businesses, whether in a mall, neighborhood shopping center or a downtown, has become the standard for success. Stepping outside this pattern is tricky.

But this did not stop the Annunzias from opening their restaurant two years ago October in an old house (formerly a video poker shop and a brothel) off Highway 51 in Fort Mill. Signs for Big Daddy's Fireworks signs sprout just beyond the gravel parking lot and sad buildings sidle them on this bleak segment of Highway 51. Yet the 45-seat Passion 8 Bistro sparks with elements of French art deco on their sign, paint choices, and interior decor. Plus a deck buffers the entrance from the parking lot.

"Eating good food is our lifestyle and our passion," Jennifer says of naming their restaurant Passion 8. She's the one who will warmly greet you. A transplant from Long Island, she watches the small dining rooms with a shrewd eye, running food or drink when necessary. Chef Luca Annunziata, a native of Sorrento, Italy, apprenticed in hotel kitchens across Europe, then at sea on a cruise ship, and worked in the test kitchen at *Good Housekeeping* magazine. It was, however, during their tenure at Charlotte's Westin Hotel (he in the kitchen, she outside) that they decided to open a catering business, which became Passion 8, the restaurant.

Passion 8's well-edited seasonal menu is filled with attributions to area farmers. Although many customers assume the kitchen is exclusively Italian, Annunziata creates current American cuisine, although two pasta dishes remain a choice on each season's menu. Currently these are red pappardelle with mussels, caramelized onion with a rosemary chardonnay sauce; and half-moon-shaped stuffed agnolotti. Pastas are made in-house to order.

Easy to recommend are the concerto of textures and flavors in the baby Bibb salad with the perched hard-boiled duck egg, and the carpaccio starter. One dish that does not work is the chilled peach soup: The sweetness of peach is compromised, not enhanced, by the herbs.

Then the entrées arrive with heady aromas. The elements of the squab dish -- the bird, sheer velvet with the surprising jolt of smoky bacon on a bed of red lentils -- are spotlight stealers; however, the dish is shrouded in sauce. Likewise, the delicate halibut, which is smartly accessorized with olive sticky rice, glistening summer squash and tomato gastrique, spent too much time in the sauté pan, thus tasting more fried than marine. Of the desserts, the most effortlessly likeable is the tiramisu.

Service is personable -- good for those wanting a relationship with a restaurant, not so good if you wish to remain anonymous. Lunch prices range from \$7 to \$13. Dinner entrées on the summer menu are \$19 for pasta to \$32 for the center-cut rib eye with seared sweetbreads.

The emphasis on pleasuring the palate is a serious matter at Passion 8, and the kitchen spends time on the details. Chef Annunziata's high-wire cooking is thrilling to taste -- even with missteps. In October 2010, the Annunzias plan to host a group of 30 on a cook's tour of Italy. Highlights include foraging for truffles. And why not? Finding treasures in unexpected places is a theme in which the Annunzias excel.



Catalina Kulczar-Marin

PASSION-ATE: Owners Luca and Jessica Annunziata

## INFO

Passion 8 Bistro, 3415 Highway 51.  
803-802-7455. Lunch, Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. until 3 p.m.; dinner, Tuesday through Thursday, 5 p.m. until 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 11 p.m. Closed Sunday and Monday. Patio. Catering. Reservations are recommended for the weekends.  
[www.passion8bistro.com](http://www.passion8bistro.com).