



Adventures In Dining

by Charles Jenkins

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Picture this: You're from Sorrento, Italy, and at the young age of 17, armed with a huge passion for cooking, you leave home with your sauté pan to make your mark in the culinary world. You cook in the finest restaurants in London, Germany and Switzerland, and flex your spatula for a few years on a premier luxury cruise line, after which you whip up some goodies on a few more continents.

You even become the personal chef for the Zagats - as in the founders of the Zagat Survey, the renowned dining guide. You find yourself working for the Hearst Corporation, preparing private luncheons for celebrity guests, and while there you meet the woman who becomes your wife. The next thing you know, you're chef de cuisine at the new Westin Hotel in Charlotte, and life is good.

One day, your wife comes home and says she has found this great location for a restaurant - not too big, with enough room for 50 to 60 guests, including a cozy little private dining room and a nice fully complimented bar. Oh, and by the way, the place used to be a brothel. But that was before it was a video poker parlor. So, all that would have to be done is to completely gut the place and make a restaurant.

It took Jessica and Luca Annunziata 18 months to accomplish just that and open their pride and passion - the Passion8 Bistro in Fort Mill, South Carolina.

As you step into Passion8 Bistro, the warmth of the romantically intimate dining room provides an immediate sense of relaxation and special treatment. You'll be warmly greeted by Jessica and the courteous and professional wait staff. Once you have been comfortably seated, you will most likely see Luca step out from the kitchen, smiling and skipping around the dining room, greeting and checking on guests; sharing his passion for the great care taken in choosing the evening's ingredients, like fresh San Marzano tomatoes imported from Italy, and the fact that all of the pasta served is made strictly fresh from scratch.

Dinner started with a perfectly prepared martini - Jessica is a master bartender and martinis are her specialty. In addition to a fully stocked bar, there is a very nice, very reasonably priced wine list.

On the Spring Menu, you'll find a couple of most delectable appetizers: Beef Negamaki Tempura - Scallion Tempura Battered and served with Sirache Plum Aioli - what a treat! The other delicacy is the Pan Seared Lobster Timbale with Mango Coulis and Crispy Plantain Chips - delightfully different.

A magnificently presented salad is the Modern Caesar - Romaine, Parmegiano Reggiano Tuille with a Roasted Red Pepper Band and Yellow Sundrop Tomato - with flavors fresh and crisp. I immensely enjoyed the culinary work of art that is the Passion8 Salad - Lolo Rossa (known for its red-edged tips and frilled-looking leaves), Red Beets, Shaved Red Cabbage, Walnuts, Apple and Brie cheese with All-Grain Mustard Vinaigrette - fantastic flavors combined perfectly. Everything is made daily from scratch, strictly fresh, supporting local growers at their best.

I was extremely pleased with the Bison Short Ribs - braised with Pinot Niro wine and served with Horseradish Mashed Potatoes. The meat was as tender as it was flavorful. I have also enjoyed the wonderful Angelottidel Giorno - Half Moon Ravioli of the Day - the freshest possible hand made pasta in a delicate sauce. For seafood, you can enjoy the Pan Seared Chilean Sea Bass - Panko Encrusted with Miso Honey, served over Turned Potatoes, Baby Bok Choy and Pomegranate Buerre Blanc; or A Shrimp To Remember - served with Caramelized Shallots, Polenta Spears and Roasted Red Pepper Sugo.

Maybe you're in the mood for lighter fare, or you want to share with a few friends. Passion8 Bistro has a very nice Tapas menu that includes Jumbo BBQ Pork Tortellini, Jumbo Lump Crab Eiffel Tower and Pan Seared Sea Scallops.

And then there's dessert. The Tiramisu is smooth and creamy and as good as it gets, offered with a chocolate-coated biscotti. But the Chocolate Soup is the absolute definition of decadent dessert - the finest of chocolate, melted perfectly with Crème de Banana, hiding the sweet treasures of fresh minced berries, topped with whipped cream and a chocolate biscotti. Need more chocolate? Simply ask Jessica, the master of the martini, to prepare a specialty chocolate dessert martini.

Passion8 Bistro is located on Highway 51 in Fort Mill just off I-77 at Carowinds Boulevard. The restaurant is open Tuesday through Saturday for lunch from 11 a.m. and for dinner from 5 p.m. Lunch selections are \$7 to \$13; for dinner, salads are \$8, appetizers are \$13 and \$14; entrées are \$19 to \$26. It's all at www.passion8bistro.com.