

charlotte

Food, local flavor, and fun in the South's Queen City

BY HEIDI BILLOTTO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN O'HAGAN

WHEN THIS CITY WAS NAMED FOR QUEEN CHARLOTTE Sophia of England in the late 1700s, its future growth and development were just a twinkle in the queen's eye. In the 1970s, 200 years later, Charlotte was still a beautifully sweet but sleepy little Southern town. It had a couple of locally owned steakhouses and one French restaurant, but there were blue laws prohibiting the purchase of alcohol in dining establishments. And you couldn't get a pizza delivered if you begged. Valet parking? Forget it.

Restaurants were predominantly meat-and-threes featuring country-style, down-home cuisine. Diners had a choice of meats and well-seasoned but often overcooked ham- or pork-laden veggies. In addition to collards, green beans, vinegar-marinated onions and cucumbers, potatoes, and rice and gravy, banana pudding was listed as a vegetable on almost every menu in town. Although there's nothing wrong with such menus—particularly the banana pudding part—Charlotte had the potential to become so much more.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, a bevy of small local banks grew to make Charlotte one of the largest banking centers in the United States, second only to New York City. Further development has made Charlotte the largest metropolitan area in North Carolina, and with this growth came many transplants, a rededication to the visual and performing arts, a host of museums and universities, and plenty of chef-driven and locally owned upscale and down-home dining options. Yet the city hasn't lost its small-town feel, and its well-known Southern hospitality still abounds. Don't miss an opportunity to taste what Charlotte has become.



PASSION 8 BISTRO

This tiny dining destination is situated just over the state line in Fort Mill, South Carolina, but it's still a big part of Charlotte's restaurant scene. Owners Jessica and Luca Annunziata, proprietress and chef, are living their life's dream—and diners are lucky to come along for the ride. Luca makes the magic happen in the kitchen, while Jessica runs the front of the house and makes a mean cocktail. Luca and talented sous chef Josh Kielman shop with local farmers every morning in preparation for the market menu each evening.

One must-try, the calamari, is ever so lightly battered, flash fried, and then tossed in a jalapeño-laced *beurre blanc*. This dish is so popular, regulars refuse to let Luca take it off the menu. In season, don't miss the ricotta-stuffed squash blossoms that are deep-fried and served with a zucchini or an eggplant cream. Many of the blossoms are grown in the restaurant's garden. Customers in the know order this appetizer in advance, when they make their reservations. If you're a beef lover, the 32-ounce cowboy-cut steak generously topped with sliced fresh Italian truffles, seared local sunny-side-up eggs, and braised local veggies weigh in with a ton (almost literally) of rich flavor. Scallops are pan seared and so tender you can eat them with a spoon. Farro risotto is a favorite side that often accompanies seafood dishes, as well as vegetarian plates.

Kielman's dessert offerings are also well-balanced works of art, from silky panna cotta to the sweet yet slightly spicy chile-chocolate.

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