

The Charlotte Observer

Home is where the hearty is

By Helen Schwab, Food Critic

Is it a bistro? A trattoria? An art nouveau-on-a-shoestring roll of the dice that feels more like someone's home?

Passion8 Bistro is all three.

Luca and Jessica Annunziata own it. He's a butcher's son from Sorrento, in southern Italy, and spent years cheffing across Europe and for a cruise line internationally before heading to New York. There, while working at the celebrity-dotted Island Mermaid in Fire Island, he met Jessica. She's a second-generation Italian "girl from Queens" who was waiting tables to put herself through college.

He planned to return home to Italy; she planned to go there. They got together, then left together after 9-11. But after 21/2 years, they wanted to return – to a place smaller than New York, but cosmopolitan enough to appreciate Luca's cooking. He found work at Ember Grille at uptown's Westin and she waited tables again, keeping an eye out for somewhere to make their own. She found it, in a beat-up Fort Mill diner that had once been, she says, a brothel and video poker place from the "Fort Vegas" days, when poker palaces packed this stretch of road.

The first time she showed it to him, he refused point blank, she says, and for good reason: Between what it did have (linoleum stapled over carpeting and a ventilation hood installed backwards) and what it didn't (air conditioning or complete gas lines), renovation took nine months. Her \$500 décor budget bought art nouveau prints and Belle Epoque-style knickknacks, and the colors became maroon and black, reminding Jessica of her Italian grandmother's home. And what you feel, from the warm welcome to the solicitousness of servers, is the 40-seat place's eagerness to please. (Hence the sense of bistro.)

The menu is a compendium of the chef's travels: predominantly Italian dishes (hence the trattoria definition), but with French and Asian twists. The most successful we tried was lush sea bass over bok choy, bold but not overpowering. Also compelling: a modern Caesar, a band of roasted red pepper holding the salad vertically, but not sacrificing flavor for form. Delicious.

The least successful was a dismally oily beef tempura; it was offered another night as an amuse and was much better cooked, though still tough. The sirache plum aioli (a spicy-sweet-edged mayonnaise) on both occasions fared beautifully.

Bison short rib fell off the bone, though its sauce had inched across the border from caramelized to faintly bitter. But its accompanying horseradish-mashed potatoes were perfect. So were housemade pasta in the form of agnolotti (sizable stuffed semicircles), the Passion8 salad (the red crinkled lettuce called Lola Rossa with beets, walnuts, apple and brie) and a classic, eat-it-by-the-ladleful tiramisu. (And I thought I didn't like tiramisu anymore, after all the bastardized versions I've had.) It's much better than the sexier-sounding but less full-bodied chocolate "soup," essentially a sauce poured over berries.

Tasting menus are picking up speed as well; call at least a day in advance and you can have six- to nine-course meals for varying prices. Passion8 will also cook especially for vegetarians, vegans and those with dietary hardships such as celiac disease; in fact, if there's anything a diner desires that's not on the menu, the Annunzias, with a day's notice, will take a shot at it.

The menu changes about every two months and it's kept up to date by Luca's brother – in Italy. Mom is slated to come in August and stay for a month, cooking classics alongside Luca.

And out front? "I wanted it to feel like (diners are) in my living room," Jessica says. "We want to give people a reprieve from the chaos of life ... That's why I'm so happy about our location. There's nothing like a good cocktail or a really good glass of wine and nowhere to go."