

The Fig Tree, owned by Greg and Sara Zantisch, calls the historic Lucas House in Charlotte's Elizabeth neighborhood home and just celebrated its 10th anniversary in March of this year. The house, a restored Craftsman bungalow, was originally built in 1913 by Charlottean John Paul Lucas, then the editor of the Charlotte Evening Chronicle. During the 1970s the house was an antique shop and later was upfitted to become a restaurant space.

This is a serendipitous story of being in the right place at the right time and being ready to make the move. A culinary graduate from the New England Culinary School in Burlington, Vermont, Greg landed what some might think a dream job right out of school. He was a part of the culinary team to open the Ritz in Maui and then spent time working at Auberge du Soleil in Napa Valley, before leaving to look for something more. Along the way he met his wife Sara.

The Fig Tree Restaurant

Meantime, just as the couple was looking for a place to land, Greg's parents, on a routine trip home to Florida, stopped in Charlotte after visiting their daughter at Clemson. During the course of their stay, they had drinks and dinner at a neighborhood restaurant called Cibi and found that the historic house it called home was for sale. They passed the word to Greg and Sara and like that, feeling the area had potential and the city a good place to start a family, the couple made an offer on the property. It took a year of upgrades and renovations to make this historic house a home to the restaurant they had always dreamed of, and they opened the doors in March of 2005.

The combination of classic tones of French and Italian cuisine, with Greg's creative culinary style and Sara's impressive skills at running the front of the house, have been the foundation for the reputation The Fig Tree garners today. As the restaurant has grown, so has the Zantisch family. And like the original fig tree for which the restaurant is named, the family has planted deep roots in the community. Greg and Sara live in the Elizabeth neighborhood now have three children: two girls and a boy all under the age of six. Will the kids follow in their parents footsteps? – only time will tell; but it's for sure that they their taste for great food has peaked early, and Dad says they love the fact that they have a pastry chef ever at their disposal!

Fine service and the attention the detail are the two fundamentals to which Greg credits the restaurant's success. "You can't let anything go," he explained. "Replacing a burned out light bulb, is as important as the quality of the steak."

Quality is important on all fronts at The Fig Tree and it shows. While he doesn't always list specific farm names on his menu, Greg uses as much local product as possible and regularly features farms like Tega Hills Farm on the menu as well as fresh caught seafood from Charlotte Fish Company's Tim Griner. While pastry chef, Samantha Ward is turning out beautiful ends for every meal, Greg keep the savory side of the menu seasonal, changing specials week to week and always including a little seafood, and a little game; but some things never change. Case in point, the elk chop. "It's on the menu year round – our customers won't let us take it off, if we did we might have a riot on our hands," he laughed.

To accompany the fine food, the wine list sports

attention to detail, when a member of the waitstaff connects with a customer, they are encouraged to write a thank you note.

As a customer I can tell you that it blew me away to get a handwritten letter in the mail from our server. And, it is not just the customers that enjoy the impact of the etiquette. Several former Fig Tree staff members tell me that the restaurant was among their favorite places to have worked in the industry. Greg says he's gotten the same compliment from culinary students as well – The Fig Tree is a place where everyone wants to work – and that my friends, speaks volumes!

Over the years, the Zantisches have seen a lot come and go from the Queen City's culinary skyline, but Greg believes that it is just now coming into its own. "It's the independents who keep pushing it," he said. "You hear about national trends that fine dining is dead, but that has not been our experience at all."

Where do Greg and Sara like to eat when they are not running The Fig Tree kitchen and front of the house? Ironically enough, the two other restaurants in this feature – Passion 8 and Bonterra are both on their date night go-to list as well as Terra, a small French bistro in the Eastover neighborhood owned and operated by Thierry Garconnet and chef Bruce Moffett's Barrington's located off Fairview Road.

With the kids, dining options include one of the children's favorites, The Greek Isles in Southend – they love when the cheese comes to the table on fire, Greg says, and they want Dad to do the same! His answer: "We're not lighting anything on fire in a 100 year old house!"

For more on what's hot and happening at The Fig Tree follow them on Facebook or check out the website at charlotte-figtree.com. The Fig Tree is located at 1601 East 7th Street, Charlotte, NC. Call 704-332-3322 for reservations. *



Pastry chef Samantha Ward and owner Greg Zantisch

over 1000 labels offering something for every palate. His inspiration comes from travel Greg told me, noting that they like to plan at least one big trip to a different city each year.

Beautifully prepared food and excellent wine list notwithstanding, it's the service at The Fig Tree that totally sets it apart. The restaurant is comfortable but not stuffy, and relationships are all important. Due to Sara's diligence and again that all important

