

Passion 8 is one of Charlotte's most celebrated dining spots, and its history is a colorful one.

Owned by husband and wife team Luca and Jessica Annunziata, the Passion 8 story started long before the restaurant opened its doors. When the couple met, they immediately found their passion, not just for each other, but for the food and restaurant business as well.

For years the two—Luca originally from Sorrento, Italy and Jessica from Long Island, NY—worked for other restaurants and food services from Italy to San Francisco, Arizona, Colorado and New York, loving every minute but always looking for something more. A position with the newly opened Westin Hotel in Uptown Charlotte brought them to the Charlotte area about 10 years ago.

At the time the couple was content to work for someone else—Luca in the kitchen and Jessica as a server in the dining room—but they knew there would be more to come. The move south to Charlotte reminded the couple of Luca's southern Italian home—still four seasons but without the harsh winters.

"We were looking for a city that fit us," added Jessica. "Charlotte just seemed to be the right fit." Plus, Luca added that they could tell the city had the potential to make their passion a reality.

It was always their idea, their dream and their passion to open a place of their own. One day on her way back home from work, Jessica was struck by a small non-descript building on Hwy. 51 in Fort Mill. The small old building was not officially historic in the same way the Lucas House and the church that was to become Bonterra are; but was a local monument nonetheless—with its own little bit of history.

Back in the day the building Passion 8 originally called home was home to a fried chicken joint, before that The Poker Palace and in an earlier incarnation, a brothel. All of which explains the lack of windows and natural light.

The day Jessica drove by a new tiny building with the big colorful history, the Annunzias realized this could be the start of their future.

They signed the lease and dove into it feet first. Without the funds for a complete redo of wiring and restrictions on cutting out new windows, Jessica and Luca embraced the tiny building that was the start of their future. Instead of complaining about the dark dining room, they saw their glass as half full and turned the dimly lit interiors into candlelit atmosphere, presenting guests with itty-bitty book

lights as they came in to better read the menu.

The original Passion 8 menu first featured Annunziata's fine globally influenced flavors, sparked with the seasonings of his homeland; but it wasn't long before Luca found area farmers and all they had to offer. The transition from a menu with a heavy Mediterranean influence to more of a sophisticated farm to fork approach started to develop.

That first kitchen was small, but Luca cooked up big things as his team slowly grew from 1 to 3. With time, word spread, and the rest as they say, is history.

After eight very successful years, Jessica and Luca decided the time was right to take the next big step, moving to Charlotte and opening in brand new, much bigger digs this year.

The couple agrees with other restaurateurs featured here, that the time is right for Charlotte restaurants to really start making an impact and garnering a national reputation. Not only are chefs ready, but the Charlotte dining public is ready as well, and that makes for a perfect pairing.

# Passion 8

## Fine Dining & Catered Events



Jessica and Luca Annunziata

"It comes in phases, explained Luca from the beautifully appointed bar area of the all new Passion 8 in Charlotte's redeveloping Elizabeth neighborhood. "Chef Tim Groody of Fork! Restaurant in Cornelius started it all, recognizing local farmers on his restaurant's menus. Now it's expected that chefs shop local, and it's important to our customers that we support local farms as well."

The couple agrees that in 2015, it's the educated consumer who is really moving Charlotte's dining horizons forward, and the Annunzias are glad to be a part of it all.

The Passion 8 menu is constantly changing, not just at the whim of the chef, but instead based on availability of local product which can make a menu vary from week to week or day to day.

Luca explains that now his approach is different. He started in the restaurant business planning menus and then shopping for product. Now Luca and his team of chefs, who support upwards of 50 local farms at any one season, say they look for and find product and produce first and then let the menus develop from there.

Still enjoying their roles as proprietress and executive chef at the new location, owners Jessica and Luca Annunziata are a charming couple who are living their life's dream, and we as diners are lucky enough to come along for the ride. Luca continues to inspire his culinary team making the magic happen in the kitchen while Jessica runs the front of the house with assistant GM Tori Bagdoian, who coordinates the catering operations and makes a mean cocktail to boot.

Opening a new restaurant and maintaining a reputation is a 24 hour a day job, and the couple

admits that often dinner is a late night PB&J; but when Jessica and Luca are not working they enjoy spending time with their one-year-old Julian and trying out small family-owned area Asian restaurants—the current family favorite is Doan's on South Blvd.

If you are follow social media, you can keep up Luca and Passion 8 on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; or sign up to get on the Passion 8 email list for monthly email newsletters with an update on wine and cocktail dinners, cooking classes and more. For reservations call 704.910.3161; for more information visit [thepassion8.com](http://thepassion8.com). Passion 8 Fine Dining & Catered Events is located at 1523 Elizabeth Avenue in Charlotte. \*

