

## The Evolution of Angelica's

It's a peaceful scene, the courtyard that runs the length of Angelica's (863 Main Street), where bistro lights cast a warm glow through the trees and over antique Italian statues, jazz music is piped overhead and the soft babble of a waterfall provides a soothing soundtrack. Hard to believe that Angelica's, formerly Angelica's Bistro, is not the product of calculating restaurant moguls, but is the realization of the vision of husband-and-wife air cleaning equipment salespeople turned antique dealers.

That couple, Peter and Angelica Cuschieri, have evolved into the city's fine-dining and entertainment power pair.

"This used to be an antique auction house called Bizarros," Peter Cuschieri says, gesturing to the slate gray building. The lilt in his voice belies his London roots as he explains how the rise of eBay disrupted the traditional antique auction scene, which led to the Bizarros approaching the Cuschieris, then customers, about buying the business. "Angelica and I went for it, turning it into an antiques consignment shop," he said. "But we also wanted a place where we could offer our customers coffee or a light bite. That's where Angelica's Bistro came in."

They kept the storefront dedicated to antique ware and the side driveway to European fountains and statuary and transformed the outdoor space into a courtyard fit for a panini or salad.

"We started off small. It's all we really could do, since we did not have a full functioning kitchen," Cuschieri explains. Lack of space and lack of formal restaurant ex-



*Peter and Angelica Cuschieri*

perience made for a steep learning curve. It also planted an idea: with the proper equipment and facelift for the interior and exterior of the building, Angelica's Bistro could be reborn as a fine dining and entertainment venue.

"I've always loved the idea of dinner and a show," Cuschieri said, with excitement. "We want to offer people the chance to have elegant food and enjoy live music and dancing." The Bizarros, Frank and Liza, who still own the building, agreed with the Cuschieris' vision.

"We could not have done this without Frank and Liza's support," he said. "It's very important to note that. We were so lucky that they shared our vision, and that Liza and Angelica have such good taste."

Angelica's sultry, elegant, interior is dark, rich and exudes energy, as if the Latin jazz of Pete Escovedo lingers in the air, or as if you could still hear the bang of the heels of Emmy-award winning dancer and choreographer Yaelisa's Caminos Flamencos.

"We've made sure this space is perfect for the best show possible, from the lighting to the sound equipment. We even have a special stage for flamenco and Irish danc-

ers that highlights the sounds of their dance."

Peter's commitment to entertainment is mirrored in Angelica's dedication to food. She and Executive Chef Manuel Nuñez have established an eclectic, internationally influenced menu emphasizing fresh ingredients.

"We considered focusing on French food, but we love the creativity and flexibility that California-style cuisine offers," she said.

Dishes such as Thai coconut prawns, the crowd favorite Prime Rib Shepherd's Pie, or the vegetarian cauliflower fritters mean that no meal at Angelica's can be pigeonholed. Expertly crafted by a mixologist, even the cocktails are crisp, creative, and capitalize on fresh squeezed juices and muddled herbs grown on the restaurant's patio.

At Angelica's the vision for fine dining is not limited to dinner.

"There's nothing worse than craving breakfast or brunch, but missing the menu window. So we just got rid of the time constraints," Angelica says.

A hearty menu, including hueveos rancheros and smoked salmon crepes is offered until 2:30 p.m. each day.

From pulling off a massive overhaul to simply abandoning brunch deadlines, the Cuschieris have an eye for what works and what doesn't, and for fixing what does not, even if it goes against tradition.

"We have two goals, and two goals only," Peter Cuschieri said. "Entertainment and fine dining. Nothing more, nothing less." **C**

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