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Anticipation builds as Coppa readies itself for grand opening on Shawmut Ave.

by Kate Lindsmith
Contributing Writer
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Coppa, a new enoteca fronted by local chefs Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette, will make its anticipated debut in the South End very soon—at least that's what Oringer and Bissonnette have been telling eager followers since August.

Both chefs, who have ample experience in the Boston restaurant domain, said a combination of unforeseen structural snags and the fire department's permit regulations has stalled the wine bar's opening date, which Boston's vigilant foodie bloggers reported to be in late August—then September—and then November.

"[The fire department inspectors] are just making sure the restaurant is as safe as possible, which is great," said Bissonnette, who has served as executive chef and co-owner of Toro, Oringer's popular tapas bar, for the past three years. Neither Bissonnette nor Oringer could specify exactly when they expect to open, but both chefs optimistically predicted the date to be just one or two weeks away.

In the meantime, the duo has been working with staff to develop its menu of "stuzzi"-Italian bar snacks at just \$5 each, pasta, and wood-fired pizza, which is the most expensive item at \$15.

"We wanted it to be something like you would run into at a dead end in Rome, where you can smell the wood burning in the oven, there's very little signage, and you can grab some small plates with good, reasonably-priced wine," said Oringer.

Discretely located on the corner of Shawmut Avenue and Milford Street, Coppa transmits a warm intimacy through tightly packed tables and a chalkboard wine menu. A sleek lacquered finish coats the wood bar, where guests can sit and admire the extensive selection of Italian cordials used to make cocktails and aperitifs.

"The way people drink in Europe, they will have light, pre-dinner cocktails like aperol spritzes. Here, the food would just not go well with a dry martini," said Oringer.

Oringer and Bissonnette developed the concept of Coppa while working together at Toro. A South End resident of 12 years, Oringer said he always dreamed of opening a restaurant near his home. Once the modestly sized space at 253 Shawmut Street became available last winter (when American bistro The Dish closed), Oringer saw an opportunity to develop a new project in his own neighborhood.

"I've always wanted to have a place close to home, where my wife can stop in and just have a pizza on a cold winter night," he said.

Counting Coppa as his sixth restaurant in Boston, Oringer, 44, has earned prestige as an innovative chef with successes like KO Prime, Uni, and La Verdad. He has also achieved national recognition with a James Beard award (the equivalent of an Oscar for chefs) and an appearance on the Food Network's *Iron Chef*.

Oringer's expertise combined with Bissonnette's flair for the original makes Coppa more than just a traditional Italian wine bar. Though classic Italian staples are certainly available, many items on the menu represent a subtle departure from tradition: the lasagna bolognese mixes classic meat ragu with a butternut squash puree béchamel, and a baked tripe dish is served with squash and "tomato gravy."

"We will always add a little more flavor wherever we can grab it—but it's still Italian," said Oringer.

Bissonnette, whose arms are covered in full tattoo sleeves, rejects the idea of adhering to strict rules in the kitchen, saying he values combining interesting flavors more than honoring a rigid tradition. He mentions adding soy sauce to a classic Italian Bolognese pasta "just to enhance the base flavors—but any traditional Italian grandma might have me killed for that."

"Don't get me wrong—I love French and Italian classics," he added. "But restaurants need to evolve. Cooks need to evolve."

Bissonnette, 32, padded his culinary recipe in places like Paris, New York and San Francisco after graduating at 19 with a degree in culinary arts from The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale in Florida. Since returning to Boston, Bissonnette has commanded at restaurants like Pigalle and Kenmore Square's cult favorite Eastern Standard, and was featured as a [Rising Star Chef](#) in October on [starchefs.com](#).

Bissonnette attributed the lure of starting a business at 253 Shawmut Street to the property's affordable rent and wood-burning oven. He said he thinks Coppa is well suited to the South End because the neighborhood lacks restaurants with a "small Italian plates concept," and he hopes the easy elegance of his new local enoteca will attract regulars.

South End resident Karen Wackowski, who lives just blocks away from Coppa, said she regularly walks her dog past the restaurant to see if it is opened yet.

"I'm a big fan of the chef's work, and my friends and I have been waiting to get to check out [Coppa]. I was so excited to hear it was opening so close," she said.

While meeting with staff last week at the restaurant, Bissonnette was approached by two women who walked through the door asking if Coppa was opened yet. Once again, he told them no, but to come back "soon."

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