

Lowcountry Gourmet

Charleston moves to the top of the food chain.

BY JAN GREENBERG

"This is the thing about Charleston," said the man with whom I fell into conversation while eating lunch at the bar at 39 Rue de Jean. "When someone goes out to eat, the first question they ask is, 'Where do you get your shrimp?'"

Which demonstrates a pretty serious food sensibility, a fact that seven days of eating our way through the city confirmed. Charleston, South Carolina, is a great dining town, not only for its distinctly regional cuisine, but also for its ambience, friendliness, and beauty. Charleston's also a walking city, with most restaurants clustered together downtown, minimizing the need for a car. The bar scene is active and diverse, and accommodations range from simple to luxury bed and breakfasts and hotels.

We chose the Planters Inn, a 64-room boutique hotel located in the center of the city's downtown. The rooms are generously sized, the housekeeping impeccable, and, like so much in Charleston, it has an interesting history. Purchased out of bankruptcy court by local businessman Hank Holliday in 1994, the former dry goods emporium had been constructed in 1844. After a major refurbishment it reopened as the Planters Inn, the kind of place where daytime concierge Bertha Gadsden calls housekeeping when you leave in the morning to say that your room is vacated and ready for service.

Charleston is the epicenter of Lowcountry cuisine, which encompasses a small coastal region that stretches from roughly 60 miles down to the Savannah River. A complex system of rivers, estuaries, and inlets supports a rich variety of seafood including shrimp, and clams. The loamy wet soil supports rice, once a major commodity. Game, including white-tailed deer, quail, ducks, and wild tu subtropical vegetation outside the city. The cuisine embraces a mix of cultural influences—Native American tribes, early British se Huguenots, and African and West Indian slaves who worked the plantations and whose descendants in the area often still speak t Gullah language. Yes, it's Southern cooking, but it is uniquely Lowcountry. It wasn't until fairly recently, however, that Charleston a position in the nation's culinary scene. Today, there are some topnotch chefs here, many of whom trained at some of the nation's restaurants.



Among them is Chef Frank McMahon at Hank's Seafood Restaurant, located i overlooking the Historic Market. McMahon, a Culinary Institute of America gra seafood skills at New York City's Le Bernardin, has been in the kitchen since t opening. Hank's combines the contemporary and the traditional in dishes like i seafood stew, and what is generally acclaimed to be the city's best she-crab s the fried seafood platter offers a satisfying crunch, and McMahon's collards, s country ham and a dash of vinegar, were the best we had in Charleston. Ther a community table, making Hank's a particularly pleasant place if you are eati

For Bob Waggoner, executive chef at Charleston Grill, the award-winning flags Orient-Express hotel Charleston Place, it's all about ingredients—getting the b and taste. This is four-star dining and a showcase for contemporary Lowcount features seafood prominently and uses only fresh Gulf shrimp certified by Wilc His pan-seared brown shrimp were redolent of the iodine-laden kelp they cons waters in which they thrive. Served on a bed of celery root mousseline with ter the shrimps' briny flavor was brought out by a mild pinot noir reduction.

Since our visit, Waggoner has reworked the menu with the dishes now groupe categories: Southern, offering such entrees as catfish with shrimp gravy and h soufflé with bacon; Pure, which showcases specific ingredients; Lush, from the and Cosmopolitan, with a global sensibility.

One of the most sumptuous spaces, to say nothing of the food, is Oak Steakh restoration retained the original design elements of the 1850 South Carolina L Building. The walk-in, gold-hued vault now houses wines. You don't want to sc count for the next day if you eat here—this is red meat territory, with Brooklyn-Brett McKee serving big slabs of porterhouse and New York strip on a sizzle p onions and a house-made balsamic barbecue sauce. But this is still the South both a pan-fried pork chop rubbed with fennel and Parmesan and served with applesauce as well as a perfectly battered fried chicken. For complete indulg

macaroni and cheese. Desserts are practically a meal in themselves here, including a cheesecake, based on his mother's recipe v after her death. This spring, he will be opening an upscale seafood restaurant named El Mare, which will be located next door.

Before you go to McCrady's, you might want to brush up on your molecular gastronomy. The restaurant occupies a 1788 Georgiar George Washington once ate. The dining rooms resemble a private club with chandeliers and old, dark wood. In contrast, the sma rudimentary kitchen contains immersion circulators, vats of liquid nitrogen, dehydrators, and scientific-sounding substances that di ingredients to draw out essential flavors and transform textures. According to 28-year-old chef Sean Brock, whose kitchen at Nash Hotel was awarded five diamonds and five stars, "We get the best ingredients we can and work to bring out what is most interestir

This is not casual dining and some might even find it challenging, but we would return happily. McCrady's is the kind of restaurant where what you are eating becomes the focus of conversation. We had an amuse of "foie gras tea and roasted peanut cotton candy," which turned out to be a deep glass of liquefied foie gras with a cloud of sweet peanut flavor on top. The "roasted diver scallop and crispy pork belly" were cooked sous vide (sealed in a vacuum pack) and then seared to form a



crisp crust. Dark ribbons of tomato “jam” added an intense contrasting flavor. Crispy sweetbreads and a sous vide beef with carrot confit and caramelized fennel were followed by a dessert of liquid chocolate and a peanut butter cake with popcorn ice cream and salted caramel.

On the other end of the dining spectrum is FIG (not the fruit but “Food Is Good”). This is the kind of place you wish was just down the road from your home. Its warmth, simple elegance, and creative riffs on traditional dishes satisfy without overindulgence. Partners Mike Lata and Adam Nemirow are committed to seasonality and local ingredients, and the restaurant has been active in Charleston’s chapter of Slow Food, the international movement created to “protect the pleasures of the table from the homogenization of modern fast food and life.”

The evening begins with a nice touch—deviled eggs from a farm on nearby John’s Island. The ravioli appetizer, stuffed with a mixture of local beef and hedgehog mushrooms, were not delicate squares but more akin to overstuffed purses—big, delicious, doughy buns packed to bursting. White shrimp and radicchio salad was perfectly dressed with a warm pancetta vinaigrette. Local triggerfish, an early spring catch, was sautéed and served with a navy bean ragout flavored with savory bits of guanciale and small pieces of shaved black truffle. Vegetables included an extraordinary pan-roasted cauliflower (just add some canola oil to a cast iron pan, toss in the cauliflower, and heat the pan, searing the sides, and then stick in the oven for a few minutes). For dessert, what else? A Carolina gold rice pudding with cherries and black walnuts.

Peninsula Grill, located in Planters Inn, feels like a “special occasion” place—well-spaced tables, comfortable seats, crisp linen, and an entrance through the champagne bar, where you can pause to sip a glass of Veuve Clicquot and sample some oysters or Chef Robert Carter’s spanking fresh small plate of lobster, crab, tomato, and spinach salad with perfectly fried green tomatoes. Carter, who first gained renown among local foodies with his “Rent-a-Chef” catering operation, is among those credited with putting Charleston on the culinary map—he probably trained half the chefs currently at work in the city. His wild mushroom grits with Lowcountry oyster stew; bene-crust rack of lamb chop (from a local Berkshire, a pink-fleshed, well marbled heritage breed) with smoked bacon, cheddar grits, garlic greens, and sh menu staples. General Manager Robert Imler knows his wine well. And many visitors come simply for the infamous coconut cake, extravaganza that is also available mail order.



Slightly North of Broad (SNOB) serves terrific indigenous food using ingredients from area farms and waters. The night we visited, general manager tell the bartender who had just run out of mint that “Frank [Executive Chef Frank Lee] is going to the farm tomorrow then.” There is a house-made charcuterie that varies daily. We had a generous plate of duck liver terrine, country pâté, pork rilette presented with sweet pickles, toasted buttery garlic bread, and a small salad. The oyster stew is peppery, flavored with apple-smoked gold potatoes, and leek. Shrimp and grits, containing deep-water white shrimp, is spiced with andouille sausage. It’s the kind of place that serves regulars when shad roe or swordfish is available.



For a city its size, Charleston has a wide variety of casual, off-the-beaten-path eateries. Its extensive waterways network support a thriving oyster fishery and, to our mind, no place has a perfect presentation of their bounty. A late afternoon beer or glass of wine with a delicious plump, glisteningly fresh, and expertly shucked oysters is as close to perfection as one can get. It is still calm, the room quiet, and the afternoon light is fading.

If you are walking along East Bay Street at dinnertime and pass a small alley off the main street, you may hear a booming baritone singing “Food, Glorious Food.” Undoubtedly it’s the Robert of Robert’s of Charleston, a local institution for fine dining and impromptu entertainment. Although the kitchen is now more than capably in the hands of the Institute of America-trained daughter, MariElena Dickson Raya, and her husband, Joe, manager and sommelier, Dickson continues to serenade, much to the pleasure of their regular and longtime customers.

Kennedy’s Bakery is owned by Kevin Jordan, the former sommelier at Magnolia’s Restaurant. He has turned his “small- café/wine-bar-on-the-corner-type-place” after his daughter and features several wine plates, and baked goods. There is a long wide table in the middle and a wall of wine: \$20 a bottle, carefully selected by Jordan. A blackboard lists the day’s specials, often including a salad, rare beef tenderloin over greens, or pork tenderloin with sweet pepper sauce. The biscuits were so outstanding that we pre-ordered several dozen to take home and pick up on the way to the airport.

Ted’s Butcherblock is an all-purpose butcher/wine and cheese shop/café so unique that it was featured in Food and Wine magazine as one of the best new butchers in the nation. Ted “I Love Dombrowski—a man after my own heart—features a monthly special BLT using a different variety of meat each month. In addition to conventionally raised, grain-fed beef, he sells grass-fed varieties.

There’s a grill smokehouse store where he smokes ribs, pork, and other barbecue. “I feel it is a big responsibility for me to get people to buy from small farms when the meat comes,” he says.

We went for the lunch buffet at Gullah Cuisine, located on strip mall-studded Route 17 North in Mt. Pleasant, and were told in no uncertain terms by owner Charlotte Jenkins that we missed a lot by not getting fried oysters or catfish. But I can tell you that the buffet was exceptional: chunks of real blue cheese, a mark of a place that takes its food seriously. There’s fried and baked chicken, lima beans, okra succotash, and barbecue chicken and pork. Chefs continually buzz around the buffet, replenishing it with food fresh from the kitchen.

Sure, Jestine’s is the tourist “soul food” place in downtown Charleston, but the staff is solicitous and the food is fine. Get there early because you can get long and there are no reservations. We went for brunch and had the ubiquitous shrimp and grits, slightly underseasoned to our taste, but a dash of Lillie’s of Charleston hot sauce who cared! The accompanying sausages were plump and flavorful, procured from a producer out of town. “You’re not finished?!” exclaimed the waitress when I refused her offer of pecan pie.



Burbage's Grocery is a small, family-owned convenience store located a few blocks from downtown. It's also a Charleston institution. 80-plus-year-old Mr. Burbage overseeing the cashier while his son, Big Al, mans the butcher stand in back, preparing his popular putting out a topnotch South Carolina barbecue sandwich made from a succulent vinegar brisket (for \$3.95). Try a container of col cabbage laced with red onion in an oil and vinegar base, and you can't lose.

You might drive right past the small pink building plunk in the middle of a deserted parking lot that is Martha Lou's Kitchen, which v summer by the Southern Foodways Alliance for its traditional Southern roots. We came for a late breakfast and had our choice of two small tables that serve as the dining area. We immediately got into a conversation with a friend of the owner who proclaimed t food diet" between slugs of beer. Owner Martha Lou Gadsden's granddaughter prepared us a perfectly done crispy fried whiting a and grits.

Last but definitely not least—so good we risked missing our plane so we could return for a quick bite—is Robert Stehling's Hominy works here, from the big pepper mill on the table to the daily specials posted outside at 11:15 a.m. and then served until 8 p.m. Of lunch, and (early) dinner, Stehling's kitchen represents simple, local seasonality at its best, from the early morning, just-delivered f with grits and toast and a crock of homemade raspberry jam, to the Lowcountry purloo with chicken, sausage, and shrimp and catf base over rice. Stehling's kitchen is a showcase for the best of Lowcountry ingredients and preparations. We couldn't have asked filling, last encounter with Charleston's inventive and surprisingly eclectic cuisine. **ET**

Details

39 Rue de Jean
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Burbage's Self Serv Grocery
843-723-4054

Charleston Grill
843-577-4522
www.charlestongrill.com

Charleston Place Hotel
800-611-5545
www.charlestonplace.com

FIG
843-805-5900
www.eatatfig.com

Gullah Cuisine
843-881-9076
www.gullahcuisine.com

Hank's Seafood Restaurant
843-723-3474
www.hanksseafoodrestaurant.com

Hominy Grill
843-937-0930
www.hominygrill.com

Jestine's Kitchen
843-722-7224

Kennedy's Bakery
843-723-2026
www.kennedymarket.net

Martha Lou's Kitchen
843-577-9583

McCrary's
843-577-0025
www.mccradysrestaurant.com

Oak Steakhouse
843-722-4220
www.oaksteakhouserestaurant.com

Pearlz Oyster Bar
843-577-5755
www.pearlzoysterbar.com



Peninsula Grill
843-723-0700
www.peninsulagrill.com

Planters Inn
800-845-7082
www.plantersinn.com

Robert's of Charleston
843-577-7565
www.robertsofcharleston.com

Slightly North of Broad (SNOB)
843-723-3424
www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com

Ted's Butcherblock
843-577-0094
www.tedsbutcherblock.com

Charleston Wine & Food Festival

The 2008 Charleston Food & Wine Festival will take place Thursday, February 28 through Sunday, March 2. Now in its third year, feature Charleston's top chefs as well as guest chefs, wine professionals, and authors from throughout the nation celebrating Low

country. From the opening night Salute to Charleston Chefs, featuring wines and food pairings, to Sunday's rousing Gospel Brunch with the Jubilee Choir, the city of Charleston turns into food-lovers' central. Museums, restaurants, historic houses, and public squares become cooking competitions, lectures, tastings, festive dinners, and receptions. There is a culinary village (located a stone's throw from a Embassy Suites) hosting a continuous series of events and chef/author/winemaker appearances and demonstrations.

Tickets for the various events are sold separately and are on sale now as are hotel/festival packages. For information and sales, visit www.charlestonfoodandwine.com.

Photographs by Libba Young