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Chow Down in Charleston

With a slew of innovative chefs and stylish inns for both sleeping and nooshing, the graceful South Carolina city is a bona fide dining destination.

By Sarah Gold Published May 28, 2015

Comment



(Photo: Courtesy of Kiwanis)

Where to Stay

Luxuriate in (and try your hand at) Lowcountry cooking at **Zero George** (from \$299), a chic historic-district boutique property, which opened in an enclave of beautifully refurbished 1804 buildings in 2013. The hotel is home to 18 suites with original design elements like pine floors and period millwork (but also slick marble baths); a scenic dining spot, Zero Café and Bar; and a carriage-house kitchen where small-group cooking classes are led every week (for both guests and the public) by noted local chefs like Randy Williams and Vinson Petrello (\$125 per person).



Sleep within a former French Quarter warehouse, now filled with local art, at the Vendue.

Appreciate the art at the **Vendue** (from \$235), a historic turned stylish hotel that reopened in the French Quarter after a complete overhaul in June 2014. With 84 rooms and suites occupying a pair of historic warehouses, the property boasts a gallery-curated collection of local art, exhibition and studio spaces that host artists-in-residence, and staffers who lead comprehensive art tours of the city. Hop upstairs to one of the best rooftop cocktail bars in the city, with gorgeous views over Charleston harbor and tipples like the Hibiscus Gin Fizz (\$10).

Check out the newest addition to Charleston's boutique hotel scene, the **Spectator** (suites from \$399), set to open imminently in a graceful, brand-new building at the heart of the city's historic district. The Roaring '20s theme here encompasses the 41 art-deco-inflected suites, anything-you-desire, included-in-your-room-rate personal butler service, and a speakeasy-style lounge, where classic cocktails like Mint Juleps and Old Fashioneds (\$8 to \$18) as well as daily custom creations are sure to cure what ails you. Stay in bed late to enjoy delivered-to-your-room continental breakfast and in-room artisanal treats, like locally made charcuterie and cheeses, also included in the room rate.

Where to Eat



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Those who can't get a reservation at Husk—or just want to try a fresh take on Mexican—should stop by Sean Brock's new spot, *Minero*. (Photo: Courtesy of Minero)

Try the latest venture from hometown culinary hero Sean Brock (of the James Beard Award-winning *Husk*, and *McCrary's*) at *Minero*, which takes the chef's famed Lowcountry cooking even further south—to Mexico. At this easygoing tin-ceilinged space in the East Bay neighborhood, Brock serves up a menu of elevated but casual south-of-the-border dishes, like tacos made with fresh-ground masa and stuffed with fried catfish, housemade green chorizo, and charcoal-roasted chicken (between \$3 and \$4 a piece). Dig into innovative options like lamb-shank barbacoa, served with pickled chayote (\$24); and a torta stuffed with hot-dog confit and deli ham and smeared with chipotle mayo (\$9.50).

Cozy up with a date at *Chez Nous*, which quickly became known as the most romantic restaurant in town when it opened last June. Occupying a narrow, unobtrusive-looking two-story home on a residential downtown block, the tiny eatery is a lab of sorts for chefs Jill Mathias and Juan Casalest, who serve a daily changing Mediterranean menu of just two appetizers (\$10 to \$13 each), two entrées (\$20 to \$28), and two desserts (\$6 or \$7)—plus a short list of French and Italian wines. The two snug, rustic but elegant dining rooms—one upstairs, one down—are perfect for canoodling over shared dishes like triggerfish à la Provençale, pork-stuffed agnolotti with wilted escarole and cubes of apple; and tender duck breast with roasted grapes and wild mushrooms.

Sample tasty casual fare among Charleston's hipster foodie set at *Leon's Oyster Shop*. In a former Upper King auto-body shop (the garage door and sealed cement floors are still intact), Brooks Reitz, who masterminded the *Ordinary*, turns out creations like chili-dusted fried chicken (\$18), a shrimp roll with horseradish mayo (\$14), and char-grilled oysters—simply served with lemon, butter, parsley, and Parmesan (\$13 for a half-dozen). All pair equally well with a Chenin Blanc or a cheapo Coors draft. Be sure to also check out Reitz's new all-day café and wine bar, *Beats Alban*, less than a block away.

What to Do



Venture into the waters around Charleston with Barrier Island Eco Tours. (Photo: Courtesy of Barrier Island Eco Tours)

Explore some of the coastal areas that give Charleston its culinary bounty (not to mention its beauty) with Barrier Island Eco Tours. Morning boat trips leaving from Isle of Palms, about 30 minutes' drive east of downtown, are led by husband-and-wife naturalist team Shane and Morgan Ziegler; they offer excursions to the pristine beaches and salt marshes of nearby Capers Island State Heritage Preserve, where you can try your hand at blue-crabbing, fishing, cast-netting, birding, and wildlife-spotting (\$42 per person for adults; \$32 for kids).

Join the food-loving hordes at the Charleston Farmers Market, which takes over Marion Square downtown every Saturday. Here, more than 23 local growers and producers sell produce, like sweet corn, peaches, and berries; organically grown herbs and leafy greens; and heritage-breed meats and just-caught seafood. If you're just visiting and don't have a kitchen, you can still stock up on products like smoked olive oils from *Holy Smoke*, spice rubs from *Charleston Spice Co.*, local honey, and locally harvested tea to bring home. There's also more than a dozen food carts—including local favorite *RightOnQue*, serving slow-cooked barbecue pork ribs and beef brisket (\$9 each); and *Outta My Huevon*, dishing up made-from-scratch breakfast goodies like crispy chicken biscuits (\$9) and huevos rancheros (\$10).

Go on a guided bar crawl with a mixology tour from Charleston Culinary Tours. The cocktail-based tours, which are offered three evenings each week and last about 1.5 hours, take in three different craft bars in the Upper King area and include demos, Q&A sessions, and—natch—tipples with some of the city's most creative cocktail artisans. Almost always on the agenda: a stop at *Prohibition* and a tutorial on the bar's award-winning Ity Bltry cocktail, made with Tito's vodka, Cocchi Americano, lemon, honey, and fresh basil (\$40 per person).

Expert Picks



In neighboring Mt. Pleasant, the Pitt Street Pier offers peaceful views. (Photo: Courtesy of Town of Mount Pleasant)

Chef Andy Henderson, whose haute new brewpub Edmund's Oast was nominated for a 2015 James Beard Award, shares his favorite local haunts:

I really like *Master Music & Movies* in West Ashley. It's a great place to get lost in thumbing through old records and used CDs. Charleston's live music scene is also getting better: the *Blind*

Farm is a fun place, because it's not too big (and because the name is awesome).

My favorite surf break is off 31st Avenue in the Isle of Palms, just outside the city. The lineup can get crowded when the waves are good, but it's definitely more of a locals' in-the-know break. It also has really convenient parking.

There's a pier in the neighboring town of Mount Pleasant near Sullivan's Island called the Pitt Street Pier (or Pitt Street Bridge). It's great for fishing, with panoramic views of both downtown and the salt marshes. It's also the ultimate spot for watching fireworks on July 4.

Resources

For news about the coolest local art exhibits, concerts, and events, check out the digital edition of Charleston City Paper. Print copies of the weekly can also be found at many coffee shops and King Street eateries downtown.

Charleston Eater ranks the city's hottest restaurants of the moment; it also runs interviews with top local chefs and in-depth dining reviews.

Shopaholics can find great info about local boutiques and proprietors through Charleston Shop Curator, a blog run by a former NYC fashion stylist.

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