spring fling!

A Rivalry Rages in Annapolis (Over Croquet!)
Eat Your Way Through Charleston with Food Network
and A Traditional Home Gets a Jolt of Color

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I'll admit it: I'm addicted to the Food Network. Aren't we all? Who doesn't like to watch Alton Brown spatchcock a chicken or Guy Fieri stuff his goat cheese kissers with a gloppy double cheeseburger? Bobby Flay's gonna whip up a soufflé? Pure ambrosia.

With Southwest starting direct flights from BWI to Charleston, S.C., in March, I decided to plot out a Food Network-lovers tour of the Palmetto City. After all, it seems more foodie TV shows have been filmed here than any other city outside of New York and Los Angeles. Charleston is home to three James Beard Award-winning chefs and also this month's BB&T Wine and Food Festival (March 3-6), a culinary bacchanal that draws top toques from across the country for a weekend of cooking, eating and provocative conversations about kitchen knives. My plan was to eat where the food TV stars ate, sleep where they slept and exclaim, “Yum-O!” more times than Rachael Ray.

I arrive in Charleston on a chilly Friday and beeline it to the posh Charleston Place Hotel (888-635-2350, charlestonplace.com). Located in the middle of the Historic District, this is where Rach (she doesn’t mind if I call her that) and Giada de Laurentiis—and a host of other celebs—have laid their recipe-filled heads. It’s not too late for breakfast, so I stroll a couple blocks down Meeting Street to Joseph’s Restaurant (843-958-8500, josephsofcharleston.com).

Joseph’s is a classic breakfast and lunch diner-like restaurant that seems as popular with locals as it does with tourists. Rach started her “$40 a Day” day here with an order of sweet potato pancakes, which is exactly what I do. A trio of pumpkin pie-colored pancakes soon arrives, sprinkled with powdered sugar and topped with a hunk of pecan butter. The pancakes are surprisingly light with a wonderful autumn-y flavor. Just like Double R, I perkily proclaim them “Delish.”

Charleston’s Historic District isn’t just incredibly picturesque, it’s also darned walkable. So after breakfast I stroll along the Battery, gawking at the pastel-colored mansions and take my time poking in and out of the tony shops along King Street.

It’s nearly 3 p.m. before I end up for lunch at Jestine’s Kitchen (843-722-7224), Long lines form at this tourist trap around lunchtime, and I was warned to avoid it by a Charleston friend, but by this time in the afternoon, I have the place to myself. Rachael ate lunch here and so did anti-Food Network TV host/chef Anthony Bourdain—and by the looks of all the framed clippings hanging on its walls, near-

Jestine’s menu is all about down-home Southern cooking: okra gumbo, fried chicken, collards and fried green tomatoes. The place was named for Jestine Matthews, the housekeeper—and excellent cook—who worked for owner Dana Berlin’s family for generations. Apparently, all that down-home cooking and eating did Jestine just fine; she died in 1997 at age 112.

My waitstaff, Kelly, delivers the perfect mix of Southern charm and sass and also an excellent fried catfish special and tall glass of Jestine’s “table wine” (sweet tea). The bland okra gumbo and black-eyed peas, however, almost taste as if they were made by a Yankee.

After such a late lunch, I’m not hungry again until 9:30 p.m., which is a good thing because it’s the earliest I can get a seat at FIG (843-805-5900, eatatfig.com). The previous week, FIG’s chef/co-owner Mike Lata barely lost out to chef Jose Garces on “Iron Chef America” and the bartenders are still talking about the close defeat as I saddle up to the bar. “Why they picked sparkling wine I’ll never know,” says bar-tender Ryan Casey of the competition’s main ingredient.

FIG has been a hot dish in Charleston since it opened eight years ago—and it’s no stranger to food TV stars. Bourdain ate here in 2007 on his own dime when he was in town filming “No Reservations.” Chef/TV host Alex Guarnaschelli (“Alex’s Day Off,” “Chopped”) gushed about Lata’s hanger steak with agrodolce sauce on “Best Thing I Ever Ate” last spring.

(A transformative moment,” she called the Italian sweet-sour sauce.) In 2009, the James Beard Foundation named Lata Best Chef in the Southeast.

The slow-food, locavore movement reigns at FIG, and nearly everything here, from the locally caught grouper to the Brussels sprouts, have been sourced nearby. I can’t resist the oysters on the half-shell served with a cabernet mignonette, especially after the bartender tells me they’re delivered by a waterman who lives on a houseboat above the oyster beds. They’re some of the freshest, most favorable bivalves I’ve ever tasted. I also dig into the crispy pork trotters, “high-end scrapple,” as Ryan describes the popular dish. Yes, it’s pig’s feet, he later divulges, but the sautéed silver-dollar-sized disc topped with a fresh fried egg and marinated lipstick peppers, is salty and tangy and tasty enough to give a guy a foot fetish.

**Below, left and right:** The dining room at McCrady’s, Jack’s Cosmic Hot Dogs, FIG.

The next day I skip breakfast and join tour guide Cathy Hinson for a Savor the Flavors of Charleston Tour (803-918-0701, culinarytoursofcharleston.com). Any foodie would love this walking tour, which takes in stops around town to sample Low Country goodies from pralines to sweet potato cornbread to pulled pork. On Saturdays, the tour visits the Charleston Farmers Market, recently named the third best in the country by *Travel & Leisure* magazine. The engaging Hinson takes me to stalls selling everything from fresh produce to organically raised pig butts to traditional sesame benne wafers, and gives me an education on Charleston culinary history, which has been shaped by various cultures, from Native American to English and Spanish, and West African. Among the many pearls of Low Country culinary wisdom she dis-

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Good Tastes
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recipe to get you started:
1 quart cool water
1/2 cup kosher Salt
1/2 cup sugar
Mix in your non-reactive container until dissolved. Make 1 quart of brine for each pound of meat. Keep the brine and the meat refrigerated until ready to use.

CHICKEN You can use whole chickens, half chickens—whatever you'd like, but for competitions, chicken thighs are favored since they don't dry out as easily. Brine the chicken for at least 2 hours. Next, rub the chicken down inside and out. I use apple wood chips to smoke the chicken, but you can try others like hickory, pecan and cherry. Smoke chicken for 15 to 20 minutes—that equates to a handful of chips. Do not over-smoke! Next, transfer to a 250-degree oven for approximately 1 1/2 hours or until your thermometer reads 175-180 degrees. Remove and let rest for 15 minutes. Glaze the chicken with your favorite sauce and serve.

PORK BUTT Whole pork butts with the bone in are best. Without the blade bone they tend to dry out when cooked. Brine the meat, submerged, for 24 hours or inject the meat with brine using a syringe. A pork butt will take about 2 cups of injection. Wrap it up in plastic wrap and let sit for at least 2 hours. Remove and using a rub specifically for pork, generously rub down the meat and place on the rack in your makeshift smoker. Use hickory or try other woods and smoke on your stove for at least 1 hour—that would be 4 good handfuls of wood chips. Transfer the butt to a 225-degree oven and let cook for 9 to 12 hours or until the meat reaches an internal temperature of 200 degrees. Remove meat and let rest for a half-hour.

RIBS Buy whole spare ribs and remove the membrane that covers the bone side of the ribs. I use a paper towel to help pull the membrane off in 1 piece. Brine ribs for at least 2 hours. Cover meat with your choice of rubs and place on rack, bone side down. Use hickory chips as a starting point and smoke ribs for 30 minutes (2 handfuls of wood chips). Move smoker to a 225-degree oven and cook for 4 to 6 hours or until a thermometer reaches 190 degrees. Remove from oven and let the meat rest for 15 minutes. Serve with sauce, if desired.

BRISKET Brine a whole brisket for 48 hours or inject meat with at least 2 cups of brine with a syringe. I like to rub brisket with Dijon mustard and then generously apply a rub designed for brisket before placing the meat on a rack. Smoke using mesquite chips for at least 1 hour, which should take 4 good handfuls. Move to oven and finish at 225 degrees until an internal temperature reaches 190 degrees (about 10 to 14 hours). Remove meat and let rest for a half-hour.

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constructs dishes and throws them back together like a culinary mad scientist. The celeriac that accompanied my plate of locally caught grouper was roasted in hay. Hay! Next time I’m in town, I’ll try his new restaurant, Husk, which was booked solid all weekend.

Giada also visited Poogan’s Porch (843-577-2337, poogan’sporch.com) while she was in Charleston, and it’s there I find myself the next morning for brunch, tucking into a bowl of she-crab soup laced with sherry and thick with salmon-colored roe and chunks of crabmeat. Poogan’s, named for an affectionate stray who’s now buried in the front yard, has a hallway filled with a bizarre mix of autographed photos of visiting celebs, including Giada (“Buon Appetito— XO, Giada”), James Brown, Jodie Foster and Jim Carrey (“The food was great. You’ll be hearing from our lawyers”).

The next morning I arrive hungry at Hominy Grill (843-937-0930, hominygrill.com), home to another James Beard Award winner, Robert Stehling. Seemingly all my Food Network friends have been here. Rach kneaded over her sesame-crusted catfish with gheechee peanut sauce and sautéed okra. On “Best Thing I Ever Ate,” Brown compared eating Stehling’s chocolate pudding to “sucking the soul out of a little chocolate Easter bunny.” (A good thing, I think.) Adam Richman from “Man v. Food” dined here, as did the snarky Bourdain, who visited for breakfast and famously lambasted Ray for being a lousy tipper. (One waitress said she tipped 10 percent. Rach, come on!)

“Anything called the Big Nasty I have to have,” Bourdain said on his show, and I have to agree. The Big Nasty is a fried chicken breast stuffed between a home-baked biscuit and topped with sausage gravy and pimento-spiked cheese. Yes, it’s big, and it may have taken several months off my life, but it wasn’t nasty at all. Just the perfect meal to end a gastronomic tour of Charleston. Besides, how many times can you order something called the Big Nasty from a James Beard Award-winner?

Completely bloated—and stowing several sacks of stone-ground grits—I fly back North, knowing that very soon, Charleston’s Low Country delicacies will be just a 90-minute direct flight from BWI. All I can say is, “Yum-O!”