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'Top Chef' goes Lowcountry in delicious Charleston, S.C.



"Top Chef" finally takes on Charleston, a city that's taken Lowcountry cuisine to a new level

By **Lori Rackl**
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What took you so long, "Top Chef?"

After a baker's dozen's worth of seasons, television's popular cooking competition series has finally found its way to Charleston, S.C., one of the country's top food destinations, for Season 14, debuting Dec. 1 on Bravo.

This Southern city boasts a deep bench of kitchen talent and a prolific pantry that capitalizes on its coastal location and mild climate, which means long growing seasons at fertile farms. Its complicated past combines centuries of Caribbean, African and European influences into the region's beloved Lowcountry cuisine, rendering a rich backdrop for a food show — not to mention a mouthwatering vacation getaway.




"It really reflects America much more than, say, California or New England," chef Graham Elliot said about Charleston's culinary scene, shaped in no small part by the ingredients and cooking style of the many slaves who passed through Charleston Harbor. "You can't help but feel the history of the place and taste it in the food."

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The Chicago-based restaurateur and television personality joins the "Top Chef" cast this season as a recurring judge, helping the likes of Padma Lakshmi and Tom Colicchio (no stranger to nearby Kiawah Island) cull the herd of 16 cheftestants as they compete in culinary challenges and vie for a \$125,000 grand prize. The gig led Elliot to spend several weeks in Charleston earlier this year filming the upcoming season and eating his way around town.

"My favorite was Dixie Supply Bakery & Cafe," he said about the tiny eatery at 62 State St. (www.dixiecafefcharleston.com). "It has maybe 10 seats, just two or

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three people back there cooking food. There's no fuss to it. It's just dirty Southern food — fried egg, gravy biscuit, fried chicken on top of that. It's very non-chefy."

Another non-chefy spot Elliot liked is The Wreck, a no-frills joint on Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant, a suburb on the other side of Charleston's iconic Ravenel Bridge. Think paper plates piled with deep-fried oysters, doughy hush puppies and fresh-as-it-comes fish (www.wreckrc.com).

"It's right there on the water, and you can watch the shrimping boats coming back in — just a ton of character," Elliot said. "We did a challenge there."

The cameras also rolled at some of the most revered restaurants in the Southeast, such as FIG and McCrady's, both helmed by James Beard Award winners. FIG founder Mike Lata and McCrady's high bar-setter Sean Brock were doing the whole farm-to-table thing before it was, well, a thing. They're both masters at making the most of what's in season, and both of their eateries are worth the extra effort it takes to snag a reservation well in advance of a visit to Charleston.

"If you just walk in off the street, you won't get a table," warned a friendly Charlestonian seated on the banquette next to me during a recent dinner at FIG, an acronym for Food Is Good (www.catatfig.com). In a Southern drawl reminiscent of Kevin Spacey in "House of Cards," he insisted I get the pureed potatoes. Glad I listened; the spuds were smushed into submission until they were silky and divine.

Upon the server's sage counsel, I ordered a menu item that sounded like a dish that goes uneaten in a high school cafeteria: cottage cheese and burnt eggplant toast. Sure enough, the homemade cottage cheese was like a fluffy, creamy cloud. The subtle sweetness partnered perfectly with the smoky eggplant and thick slices of crisp brown bread.

More surprises awaited at McCrady's (www.mccradysrestaurant.com), a Charleston institution that reinvented itself into two concepts a few months ago: McCrady's Tavern and, attached via a back door, an intimate, 18-seat dining room revolving around a worth-every-penny \$125 tasting menu.

The highly sophisticated food at McCrady's — kept secret until each dish is placed in front of you — is served in an unstuffy atmosphere, where diners can wash down their delicacies with expertly chosen wine pairings (\$85) or, in the case of a guy in jeans sitting at the communal counter, a bottle of Miller High Life. No judgments here. Just darn good food. And a nice souvenir: Customers walk out with a small packet of heirloom seeds from Brock's collection. (Can't wait to see if Sea Island red peas survive on the terrace of my Chicago condo.)

Brock, a Virginia-native, made a name for himself at McCrady's before opening his game-changer of a restaurant, Husk, a half-dozen years ago.

"If it doesn't come from the South, it's not coming through the door," the renowned locavore Brock writes on the website of Husk (www.huskrestaurant.com), where magical things happen to Carolina Gold rice, heirloom kale and fried chicken skins.

"Southern cuisine was always considered a lesser style of food until Sean elevated it," said "Top Chef" contestant Jamie Lynch, a newcomer to the city's dining scene.

Last year, Lynch opened a Charleston outpost of his Charlotte, N.C., restaurant 5Church (www.5churchcharleston.com). The hip, buzzy spot — Sun Tzu's "Art of War" is written on the vaulted ceiling — sells everything from lamb burgers and gnocchi to "60 second steak," where slices of New York strip are seared to a crispy bark on one side only.





"Top Chef" contestant Jamie Lynch talks about Charleston's history and the role it plays in the city's culinary scene. Lynch is the executive chef and a partner at 5Church Group, which has restaurants in three cities, including Charleston. (Lori Rackl / Chicago Tribune)

"The steak actually takes 12 to 15 minutes," Lynch confessed during an interview at the Charleston location, housed in a century-old church.

Lynch and his partners opened a third 5Church in Atlanta this year.

"The menus are similar, but we're a little more fish-heavy here since we're two blocks from the ocean," he said.

Fellow "Top Chef" hopeful Emily Hahn has called Charleston home for the better part of a decade. She oversees the kitchen at another edgy eatery called Warehouse (www.wearewarehouse.com), whose menu features a Walk of Shame Burger with dry-aged beef from Southeast Family Farms and a garlic shrimp congee dish made of locally grown long-grain rice and white shrimp plucked off the nearby coast.

"We really embrace our local purveyors," Hahn said about her Charleston colleagues. "Over the past 10 years, I'd say there's more emphasis on the farmers than on fine dining."

When asked where she likes to eat in town, Hahn gave the same answer as Lynch: Xiao Bao Biscuit (www.xiaobaobiscuit.com), an Asian soul food spot a bit off the beaten track at the corner of Rutledge Avenue and Spring Street, not far from Warehouse. Since both "Top Chef" contestants name-checked this distinctly non-Charleston sounding restaurant, I figured I'd take a break from shrimp and grits and seek it out.

Again, I'm glad I listened. Housed in a former gas station that seems plucked straight out of the Brooklyn Hipster Handbook — and I mean that in a good way — Xiao Bao Biscuit should be required eating during a visit to Charleston. It's co-owned by husband-and-wife team Josh Walker and Duolan Walker-Li, who traveled around Asia for months, collecting inspiration for an eclectic menu that transforms the region's produce and proteins into pan-Asian specialties with a twist.

My taste buds still snap to attention at the thought of Xiao Bao Biscuit's *ekonomiyaki*, a savory cabbage, carrot, scallion and kale pancake that can (and should) be dressed up with extras like a farm egg and thinly shredded "pork candy."

You won't find traditional grub like she-crab soup at Xiao Bao Biscuit, but you will find fresh, flavorful comfort food that feels right at home in this culinary hot spot.

As "Top Chef's" newest judge Elliot put it, "At the end of the day, cooking is about taking something of lesser value and putting some love into it, which Lowcountry cuisine does better than most."

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