Shrimp and grits with crisp Benton's bacon at Husk restaurant, in Charleston. Opposite, from left: Charleston's historic Queen Street; writer Ted Lee sampling a hearty chicken dinner at the Glass Onion, south of town.
Pig-loving chefs. Boundary-pushing art. Rambling roadhouses. Genteel Southern charms. Such contradictions are what make this South Carolina city the pride of the Lowcountry. Longtime residents MATT LEE and TED LEE get their fill.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS
It wasn't the crackly, meltingly delicious fried pork skins, nor the gamy pork rillettes, that made us cry uncle before we'd even finished our first round of cocktails at Husk, a new restaurant in Charleston's historic district just blocks from the house where we grew up. And it certainly wasn't the sampler plate of country-cured hams from four Southern states: pink, paper-thin folds fanned out like swatches of translucent silk. No. It was the small crock of pork butter—salted butter whipped with rendered pork fat, for slathering over bacon-studded corn bread—that just may have been a shade overmuch hog.

Granted, that pig in the pork butter was impressive, with lineage tracing back to the wild, rangy Ossabaw brought to the Lowcountry by Spanish settlers almost 600 years ago, and which Husk's chef, Sean Brock, sources from a farm north of Charleston. Brock himself grew up in the coal country of Virginia, did time in kitchens in Richmond and Nashville, and strode into town four years ago with a culinary futurist's toolbox—the agar-agar, the methylcellulose, the sous vide circulators—to bring some contemporary sizzle to the staid, white-tablecloth McCrady's. But in Charleston, the past tends to work its spell on even the most forward-thinking newcomers, and soon Brock was poring over South Carolina planters' journals from the 18th century and feathering old Charleston receipt books (cookbooks, to the rest of the world) with Post-its. He tracked down heirloom seeds for varieties of field peas and sesame that hadn't been cultivated in South Carolina since before the Civil War. He didn't abandon the hydrocolloids altogether; in fact, his avant-garde cooking at McCrady's earned him a James Beard Award for Best Chef in the Southeast last year. But with Husk, a subdued series of rooms in a meticulously restored 19th-century house on Queen Street, Brock is doing Southern cooking that's lofty but connected to this place physically and intellectually, reaching back to the past to find a new way forward. And if his culinary revival has a tendency toward obsessiveness (five piggy plates on a single appetizer menu), we say: so much the better.

Overexuberance on the plate is a sin this city can withstand; the hyperinflated real estate market of the last boom, however, threatened to snap the thrilling tension between past and present that is so much a part of our hometown's soul. Concrete bunkers of condos rose in the marshes on the fringes of Charleston harbor, young families fled the expensive historic downtown for the suburbs, and beloved independent businesses were elbowed aside on King Street, the main commercial avenue, by national chains. Good-bye, Max's Men's Store; hello, Apple Store!

What a difference a downturn makes. People who live in and love Charleston have now had the opportunity to reflect and to focus on what elements are truly unique and worth preserving. There is a particularly tenacious young palmetto tree around the corner from our house, a flash of tropical spikiness peeking out from the narrow crawl space between two clapboard houses, that seems to suggest one answer. For at least four years, the landlords have deliberately tolerated this charming green incursion as an asset, rather than a liability, to the property. Tenacity, fecundity, charming oddity—all these are bankable qualities in today's Charleston.

As writers, we kept busy the past decade shuttling back and forth between Charleston and New York City, a mode that permits plenty of reflection about the two cities but not a great deal of meaningful life experience in either place. We've since settled into a long, uninterrupted stretch in Charleston to research and develop the recipes for our next cookbook. What surprised us in the first few months, along with the sheer electricity of Husk's opening, was the youthful energy coursing through all the city's creative communities, galvanizing the music and art scenes as well. For both visitors and residents, this salty ol' town has never been more vibrant, or more rewarding a place to be.

As David Maybank, a scion of one the city's most prominent families, explained to us at a recent oyster roast, "Despite the recession, Charleston's gotten bigger; there's simply more to it. All the old, familiar stuff we grew up with—the eccentricities—are still here, but there's more."

There may be no better example of Maybank's premise than Bowens Island, a seafood dive perched on a muddy bank of the
Folly Creek about 25 minutes from City Hall. May and Jimmy Bowen opened their place, a few rooms in a ramshackle building serving fresh seafood platters and roasted oysters from the creek, in 1946, and it soon became a legend as much for its honest Lowcountry fare as for the quirky rules enforced with a martinet's zeal by Mrs. Bowen—there was a room for the consumption of oysters only, so if a few folks in your party opted for the fried shrimp, they'd have to dine separately. Over the years, the walls acquired layer upon layer of graffiti and the mismatched furniture had been complemented with an ever-growing collection of dormant TV's. In 2006, a fire razed the restaurant, but the Bowens' grandson Robert Barber, a gentleman lawyer and ordained minister, reincarnated it as a huge pavilion on stilts, a cleaner and altogether more accommodating place. And yet the newly constructed restaurant preserves much of the unhinged vibe and sheer rusticity of the old Bowens. When we arrived at five o'clock on a Saturday, the main dining room thrummed with the sound of oyster shells hitting buckets and tables of families tucking into gorgeous blond platters of fried whiting and shrimp. The ordering line wrapped halfway around the room, and the lone bartender strained to keep up with orders at the giant horseshoe bar. May Bowen might not approve of the new regime (oyster and fish lovers eat in the same room), but the drill remains the same: order oysters, get a knife and towel for shucking, then hike down to the open-air roasting room on the ground floor and wait for the pit master to assemble your tray.

We'll level with you: Bowens can seem spartan, even challenging, but the oysters—still harvested from the restaurant's own leases on the creek at the edge of the property—are sublime, and the beers are cold; the owners' intentions are good, and the bare-bones quality of the place, even the graffiti on the walls, speaks volumes in a town that for more than a century was peeling and cracking, "too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash," as the saying goes. At Bowens, you devour this authenticity to atone for a life that may now be a bit too well air-conditioned and crisp.

Back downtown, the nightlife, still mostly confined to the northern reaches of King Street, is diversifying beyond the sports bar/dive bar, Bud/Miller dichotomies of days past (this is a college town, after all: the College of Charleston, the Citadel, and the Medical University of South Carolina, to name a few). Studied architectural candor—exposed beams, boards, and brick—is a decorative given, but there's a new emphasis on serious artists. On Percy Street, we dropped into Enoteca, a dark jewel box of a bar, for a brief nightcap, and wound up treating our group to an Italian beer tasting of such esoteric depth that Mario Batali would have been humbled. On another night, we waited patiently as the doorman at the single-barrel-bourbon-centric Belmont enforced a civilized, 46-person maximum.

A couple of evenings later, at the Charleston Pour House, in the Riverland Terrace neighborhood, we got to see a rare show by the Grammy-nominated Band of Horses, whose front man, South Carolinian Ben Bridwell, is based in Charleston, but whose anthemic, soaring Southern rock has taken him and his bandmates to the greatest venues in the world. The Pour House manages to incorporate two stages and a Cuban restaurant under one roof, and is so tame it barely needs a bouncer. The band entered (and later exited) through the front door.

As we waited for the group to take the stage, we drank »
In a place where kids learn how to net shrimp and crabs before they learn to ride bikes and know the locations of every loquat and citrus tree around town, even the word *local* has a special meaning.
Charleston

HopArt IPA’s from North Charleston’s creative (and conscientious: organic grains, biodiesel-fired kettles) Coast Brewing Company and thought about how much the climate has changed for aspiring musicians in the city. To be sure, there was music everywhere when we were growing up— you could take in a Johns Island prayer band, Philip Glass at the Spoleto Festival, and the Charleston Symphony Orchestra all in the same week. But these days, the range and quality of homegrown talent is inspirational. Band of Horses may be the most galvanizing force for Lowcountry rockers, but there are plenty of Charlestonians who’ve broken out to national acclaim: the folk-chanteuse Cary Ann Hearst, rapper Righchus, and sound-art practitioners New Music Collective. There’s Daniel D, a young violinist who emerged from the gospel tradition, was shaped by contemporary hip-hop, and recently opened for Jamie Foxx and Kanye West on BET. You name it, we’ve got it: the postmodern ragtime of the V-Tones, the Defilers’ rollicking rockabilly. Blues-punk? Check. Electronica? Got that, too.

The exquisitely curated Spoleto Festival brings, for two-plus weeks every May, top music, dance, and performance to the city, as it has since 1977, and has settled into a comfortable middle age; it’s no longer the all-consuming social phenomenon it was in the 1980s, when Charleston was smaller, but nevertheless Spoleto is a large part of why the city has risen to become such a tourism powerhouse.

Tourism has, in fact, been the number one industry in Charleston since the 1980s, and, as ever, residents can be overheard in polite company grousing about the hordes while bragging about their own house’s placement in the upcoming house-tour season. (It’s complicated.)

The latest flash point for debate, though, centers on the cruise ships that anchor at the very heart of downtown.

Can our infrastructure handle the strain of an all-inclusive, 1,000-room hotel mooring at the foot of Market Street? Can the valuable fisheries offshore handle the effluent? Charleston owes so much of its aesthetic appeal to having been an innovator in preservation law in the 1930s; can we lead the country in sustainable cruise-ship practices?

On a recent wintry Monday, Celebrity Cruise Lines’ Mercury was berthed, its double black chimney looming above the steeples of the city. But were we headed to the Restoration on King, an intimate new boutique hotel that itself embodies the story of recession-era Charleston. The site, two 19th-century storefront buildings on King Street, was originally developed for luxury condos but by the time the renovation was complete, the market for seven-figure apartments had vanished. Instead, the investors converted the property into a completely new kind of accommodation for Charleston: 16 modern, apartment-style suites that embrace the texture— (Continued on page 153)

GUIDE TO CHARLESTON

WHEN TO GO
The best time to visit is in the early fall or in spring when the tea olive blossoms are in full, fragrant bloom.

GETTING THERE
Fly nonstop on Southwest or Delta from hubs such as Atlanta, Miami, New York, or Washington, D.C.

STAY
GREAT VALUE Andrew Pinckney Inn Comfortable accommodations steps from King Street shopping and restaurants. 40 Pinckney St.; 800/505-9893; doubles from $159.

Planters Inn Classically elegant rooms in the historic district. 112 N. Market St.; 800/845-7082; doubles from $344.

Restoration on King 75 Wentworth St.; 877/221-7202; restorationonking.com; doubles from $299.

Wentworth Mansion A spacious, architecturally significant hotel a few blocks from the center of town. 149 Wentworth St.; 888/466-1886; wentworthmansion.com; doubles from $299.

EAT AND DRINK
Allouette’s Café Chef-owner Allouette Jones-Small brings a health-conscious locavore’s heart to Southern soul classics. 80A Reid St.; 843/577-6926; dinner for two $60.

Bertha’s Kitchen At lunchtime, the line can stretch out the door of this top-notch soul-food cafeteria. 2332 N. Meeting Street Rd.; 843/554-6519; lunch for two $18.

Bowens Island 1871 Bowens Island Rd.; 843/795-2757; dinner for two $30.

Enoteca 18 Percy St.; 843/577-0028; drinks for two $18.

Gaulart et Malicet 96 Broad St.; 843/577-9797; lunch for two $30.

Glass Onion 1219 Savannah Hwy.; 843/225-1717; dinner for two $60.

Hope & Union Coffee Company 199 St. Philip St.; 843/922-1023; breakfast for two $16.

Husk 76 Queen St.; 843/577-2500; dinner for two $90.

Martha Lou’s Kitchen Three generations of the Gadsden family cook at this tiny soul-food cookshop. 1068 Morrison Dr.;

843/577-9583; lunch for two $21.

Sugar Bakeshop Southern Americana specialties such as caramel cake and red velvet. 59 1/2 Cannon St.; 843/579-2891; cake for two $6.

Wildflour Pastry 73 Spring St.; 843/327-2621; pastries for two $6.

DO
The Belmont 511 King St.; no phone; drinks for two $20.


South Carolina Aquarium 100 Aquarium Wharf; 843/720-1990; sacaquarium.org.
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(Continued from page 152)

weathered brick walls; expansive windows—of early-American commercial-district architecture. Looking out over the storefronts on King Street, we had a sense we’d been in the place before. And then it dawned on us that we had: just a few years ago, our rooms had been part of our friend Will Milner’s painting studio. Back then, Will had borrowed an entire floor of the building, rent-free, from a friend in real estate.

If the time when a friend might loan a painter 3,000 prime square feet in downtown Charleston has passed, the climate for visual artists working in the city has steadily improved. One incubator for the new art scene here is Redux Contemporary Art Center, which offers subsidized studio space and printmaking and darkroom facilities to local artists of all stripes. On a recent Saturday, an open-studio day, the place was a hive of activity, each artist having turned his or her modest studio into an exhibition. Gallery-goers visited with artists, gathered pensive around a sculpture by Greg Stewart featuring wheelbarrows and trophy bucks, and attended an impromptu class in screen-printing handmade cards.

For much of the 20th century, the successful artists in town were painters in the tradition of Elizabeth O’Neill Verner and Alfred Hutty, whose Japanese-influenced watercolor landscapes and genre scenes defined the style of the Charleston Renaissance (and whose prints were once the ne plus ultra in souvenirs). Hutty’s most talented student was William Halsey, who became an abstract painter over the course of his career, and for whom the recently completed Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art is named. A number of small independent contemporary art galleries—Eye Level Art and Rebekah Jacob Gallery—have opened in the past few years, concurrent with the rise of Charleston’s most acclaimed artist of recent vintage, Shepard Fairey, the creator-activist behind the Obama Hope poster. We knew him as “Shep” back when he built a skate-

board ramp on the sidewalk in the historic district, blasted Agent Orange cassettes on a boom box, and applied goofy stickers (Andre the Giant Has a Posse) to lampposts around town.

Street-level art is a hallowed tradition in Charleston, and the next time you visit, be sure to take note of the fantastic and often florid hand-painted lettering, in calyypo colors, on the sides of the taxis in town. That same lettering can be found on the blackboard menu at Alluette’s Café, on Reid Street, where Alluette Jones-Smalls, chic and impeccably dressed, cooks her “Holistic Soul”; vegetable-centric, truly luscious, Southern food (you can still have a mean fried chicken here) that is perhaps closest to what native Charlestonians actually eat on a regular basis. She recently stepped in front of the counter to welcome and seat us at one of the dozen or so tables that make up the café, and after a chat returned to the kitchen to get down to business. Her flavorful, crisp-edged black bean burger put to shame any we might have experienced in Berkeley or Northampton, and the bright, fresh slaw that came with the salmon burger was proudly organic. Just don’t place an order if you’re in a rush, because for all its gracious hospitality, lunch at Alluette’s moves at the speed of a limping ceiling fan. And don’t expect to find Sean Brock dining here: as the purple script on the menu proudly announces, Alluette’s is a NO PORK CAFÉ.

Returning to Charleston has made us realize that so many of the buzzwords of post-recession America—sustainability, community, artisanal—have been real, and evergreen, here for centuries. Artisanal? Wrought-iron gates are everywhere, and sweetgrass-basket makers hold open studios every day on the streets of downtown. Sustainable? This town virtually invented the voluntary conservation easement. In a place where kids learn how to net shrimp and crabs before they learn to ride bikes and know the locations of every loquat and citrus tree around town, even the word local has a special meaning. An appreciation for the small-scale, the personally sourced, and the handcrafted is part of the lifeblood of this city. At Hope & Union Coffee Company, Charleston’s power-breakfast spot, there are only a handful of single-origin beans to choose from, ground and brewed to order with the careful, languorous pour-over method. But Charlestonians get that—the return to simplicity, the respect for ingredients—so on a bright spring morning, we joined blue-blooded property moguls sharing the communal table with painters and jazz musicians (the Lexus set meets the fixed-gear cyclists). Granted, Hope & Union’s space—an 1855 residence restored with airy minimalism and furnished with weathered wood—would draw even a non—coffee drinker.

By contrast, the space at the Glass Onion, the new-Charleston restaurant most likely to achieve institution status, would not win any design awards. It opened quietly a few years ago in a former used-book store next to a defunct car-detailing shop on a commercial strip south of town, but it’s helmed by a trio of young restaurateurs who honed their chops in the lauded kitchen at Fig. The Glass Onion takes a page from more-informal places—Bowens Island and the Wreck—scraping on some creature comforts in order to deliver astoundingly fresh food. Nothing casual at all about the perfectly crisp fried whole local quail and triggerfish with sunchoke purée that the kitchen was turning out at a recent Saturday brunch. It’s a dinner with a Southern locavore’s spirit and friendly new-school florishes (chefs tweet their specials: “Local Turnip Soup + Pan Fried GA Pork Chop—Powernmov!“). Its comforts might not be for everyone—we watched a group of women in their Sunday finest walk out of the place when they realized they were expected to queue up at the counter to order their food.

To them we offer this bit of news: the Glass Onion now offers table service at dinner. But we’re not sure how we feel about that.

For now, however, you’ll find us there at lunch. +

Matt Lee and Ted Lee are T+L contributing editors. They are currently at work on their next cookbook: The Lee Bros. Charleston Kitchen.