



MOUTH OF THE SOUTH

Charleston's laid-back Low Country dining scene speaks volumes.

BY MARGARET LOFTUS PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS

WHERE HAS LAMB BREAST BEEN ALL MY LIFE?" I ponder as I savor a bite of the succulent cut, fragrant with cumin and strewn with chocolate cherry tomatoes, oil-cured olives, and pine nuts. With a nose-to-tail menu, an urban farmhouse look – reclaimed barn-wood walls, communal table, industrial stools – and indie rock thrumming in the background, this restaurant could easily be in a trendy food haven like Brooklyn, Portland, or San Francisco.

Only I'm in Charleston, South Carolina – land of shrimp-and-grits and waiters who lay their *y'all*s on thick. Heather and Josh Keeler,

the couple behind Two Boroughs Larder, this cozy restaurant and local-goods purveyor in the up-and-coming Cannonborough-Elliottborough neighborhood, are part of a new wave that's reaching deep into the Low Country's scrappy agricultural heritage to reimagine Southern food.

"Charleston is coming of age," says Marc Collins, executive chef at city stalwart Circa 1886 and founder of the wildly successful Charleston Wine and Food Festival, which celebrates its eighth year February 28 through March 3, 2013. Indeed, a hum of creative energy

Husk's head barman and (right) Two Boroughs Larder's lamb.

GLOBAL GOURMET

ses throughout the city, from cool new atiques to the fanciest of kitchens that w on the city's distinctive mix of English, nch, African, and Caribbean influences. Charleston's subtropical heat relents in the , replaced by a cool, salty sea breeze that :kons locals from their air-conditioned ex- to roam the palmetto-lined streets. Span- g the lower peninsula, which is bounded the Ashley and Cooper rivers, downtown :asily navigable on foot; if you get tired, a e taxi is just a hail away. Saturday mornings bring the farmers' mar- at Marion Square, the heart of the city on lhour and King streets, which has swelled m a few tidy rows of produce and crafts idors to a full-on fair with live bluegrass l food trucks. Go as early as you can muster

and grab a cup of Seattle-worthy joe at the Cup coffee cart and a croissant from French bakery Baguette Magic's market outpost. Breakfast in hand, I escape the throng and walk a couple of blocks to enjoy it among Meeting Street's live-oak-shaded antebel- lum town houses, their gardens bright with camellias behind wrought-iron gates. After several nods, "hellos," and "hi ma'ams" from passersby, I'm reminded of the friendliness here, disarming to visiting urbanites who aren't used to making eye contact, much less greeting perfect strangers. The Charleston tourism folks have dubbed the 14-block stretch between Water and Ann streets "Museum Mile," and all 15 of its historic houses, parks, and museums are well worth a tour, if only to show off

your Civil War smarts at your next cocktail party. If you must choose, don't miss the beaux arts Gibbes Museum of Art's collec- tion of Southern pieces, such as watercol- ors by early-twentieth-century artist Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, which perfectly cap- ture the Low Country's autumn pink dusk light. A largely self-taught painter from two prominent Charleston families, Smith was part of the Charleston Renaissance, a small community of artists inspired by the fading postbellum beauty of the city once known as the "Queen of the South." Around the corner on Queen Street, James Beard Award-winning chef Sean Brock spearheads another kind of renaissance. His restaurant Husk opened in 2010 as the talk of the food world for its commitment

to Southern-grown and -bred ingredients – nary a corn kernel comes from above the Mason-Dixon Line (except for the wine, thank goodness). True to Brock's credo, a black- board in the foyer of this elegant nineteenth- century former town house lists the day's provisions and their provenance. Unlike at McCrady's, his temple to molecular gastron- omy a few blocks away, Husk shows Brock as a purist who lets heirloom ingredients speak for themselves, as in his Virginia heritage pork tenderloin with smoky butterbeans and field peas and collard greens with pot likker. Once asked by a local reporter what he'd order for lunch at Husk, Brock replied un- equivocally, "The cheeseburger": a blend of ground bacon and beef from local cows fed peanut hay, topped with a secret smoky sauce and American cheese – no substitutes. "It will haunt you." You won't find it on the dinner menu, but it's one of the bar snacks in the renovated home next door; while you're at it, pair it with a Fire in the Orchard: Maker's Mark, smoked apple juice, apple- jack, bitters, and a pickled jalapeño.

Charleston's Ashley River harbor and, in the distance, Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge.



Tip

"Ever since Charleston lassoed Spoleto Festival USA, the city has gone from a historic bastion with ho-hum food to a culinary destination. At Slightly North of Broad, the S.N.O.B. martini with locally distilled gin, followed by the city's best shrimp-and-grits, will have you whistling 'Dixie.'" – Linda Marshall, Charlotte, North Carolina-based travel advisor



clockwise from top left: Butcher & Bee's daily menu and grilled mushroom and pimento cheese sandwich, gourmet tomes at Heirloom Book Company, o Boroughs Larder, a Queen Street residence, and rainbow carrots at Marion Square's Saturday farmers' market.

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KING STREET'S MAIN DRAG USED TO BE like Anywhere, America's chain-dominated malls, but a smattering of original boutiques has made inroads. One evening, I wander into Billy Reid, one of the Alabama designer's handful of stores across the South. An old-time trio jams in the corner, and clutches of stylish twenty- and thirtysomethings

sip wine in what could be the living room of a faded elegant plantation home, with mismatched china, framed portraits and mounted deer heads, antique trunks and tables, and threadbare oriental rugs.

"Am I crashing a party?" I ask the salesperson, who, with a rumpled scarf casually tossed around his neck, looks like he stepped



Circa 1886 chef Marc Collins and (right) his duck breast with foie gras.



Y'ALL COME

A seersucker-optional menu for Charleston.

STAY The 440-room **Charleston Place Hotel** is a rare breed in a town full of quaint inns and bed-and-breakfasts. Highlights include a rooftop pool, spa (try the magnolia blossom scrub), and Charleston Grill, which pre-saged the New Southern Cuisine movement decades ago and remains one of the city's top tables today. *Doubles from \$240, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

GO Explore the city's historic churches and homes on **America by EuroPanche's** five-day private trip, with accommodations at the Charleston Place Hotel. The customizable itinerary features an immersion in Gullah to learn about the region's African American heritage, a sunset harbor cruise, private

plantation and home and garden tours, and dining at some of the city's top restaurants. *Departures: Any day through 2013, from \$4,785 for two.*

Yankee Holidays' three-day Charleston trip includes a city tour and visit to Magnolia Plantation, which dates back to 1676 and is known for extensive gardens with some 900 varieties of camellias. Travelers take their pick of three-star accommodations and can customize their time with private tours of Fort Sumter and historic house museums. *Departures: Any day through March 31, 2013; from \$567.*

EAT **Two Boroughs Larder** stakes its claim on inventive, nose-to-tail goodness sourced locally. 186 Coming Street; 843/637-3722.

Head to **Circa 1886** for a romantic dining room in a former carriage house with a healthful take on Low Country classics. 149 Wentworth Street; 843/853-7828.

Don't miss **Husk Restaurant**, chef Sean Brock's paean to Southern heirloom cuisine. 76 Queen Street; 843/577-2500.

McCrady's pairs post-modern gastronomy with pre-Prohibition cocktails in a historic building. 2 Unity Alley; 843/577-0025.

Odd hours (11 AM to 3 PM daily and 11 PM to 3 AM, Thursday through Saturday) don't dampen the buzz about **Butcher & Bee's** rotating sandwich lineup in an industrial-cool setting. BYOB. 654 King Street; 843/619-0202.

right out of an ad for the store. He explains that it's a benefit of some sort, but I'm more than welcome to stay – and can he get me a drink? Along with their friendliness, Charlestonians are an extremely social lot: There's always a party somewhere, and you're almost always on the list.

Farther up King Street in an industrial zone underneath I-26, Butcher & Bee, a year-old lunch and late-night haunt, has everybody buzzing. The inspired sandwiches rotate daily and start from scratch – they even bake the bread and grow many ingredients in the garden out back. Locals swear by the smoky "pulled" squash barbecue and the grouper collars; I find it hard to resist the grilled cheese, which arrives on a half-sheet pan with crunchy, bright pickles.

The communal table is packed and hip-hop bumps in the background, but all I can focus on is the melted sharp cheddar with pimento, roasted tomato, and a slick of honey on crisped slices of homemade ciabatta. It perfectly captures the new Charleston: a classic, reimagined. VI



Meet the producer: Market greens and Husk chef Sean Brock's canned goods.



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