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MAY 2011
RACHAELRAYMAG.COM

U.S. $3.99

FOOD & FUN: All bigger, better & still on a dime!
Charleston is having a moment

And it has almost everything to do with food.

A fresh spirit has swooped in

and lit up the town’s restaurant scene,

where chefs are breaking ground

by, first and foremost, celebrating

Southern tradition and

homegrown ingredients.

We asked John Kessler,

an Atlanta food critic and longtime

lover of Charleston,

to go in for a closer look—and taste.
A classic carriage ride through downtown
I'M HAVING DINNER WITH
Nathalie Dupree, Charleston’s unofficial food historian and woman-about-town.

We're at Husk, the city's hottest new restaurant in a generation. And boy, is she keeping its rock-star chef, Sean Brock, on his toes.

Sean himself has been delivering the food—fried chicken skins to dip in honey and hot sauce, iced local oysters dressed with buttermilk and Tennessee caviar, buttery roasted clams and sausage, all heaped on a wooden board—and Nathalie has been delivering the play-by-play commentary. Now we're into bowls of spicy cornmeal-fried flounder with succotash.

"I love this," she coos, her eyes rolling beneath her trademark swoops of silver hair. "But does it really need this rich cream sauce?"

"There's actually no cream in it," Sean says, explaining how he "milked" lima bean starch, following an old Southern recipe. They both turn to me for my opinion. Do I like it?

Who, me? I look up from my empty bowl, sauce dribbling down my chin.

Yes! I love it! I love everything about this restaurant, about this city. Over the 10 years I've been coming to Charleston on vacation, I've never seen it so...on. Sure, there have always been historic homes to tour, local crafts to buy, and sandy beaches on nearby barrier islands to visit.

But this time, Charleston feels different. It has turned into a seriously fun place to walk around, to shop around and especially to eat around. Suddenly everyone I meet has a favorite little spot to recommend—places well beyond the tried-and-true dives and the handful of great but wickedly expensive restaurants that used to define the dining scene. Far-flung neighborhoods that used to be a little sketchy or dull are now filled with funky shops, bars and bakeries to explore. All you need is a good pair of walking shoes.

PICTURE YOURSELF HERE

The downtown fills a small peninsula shaped like the blunt end of a crayon, with rivers running on either side. It's packed with shops, restaurants and the scores of churches that give Charleston its nickname, Holy City.

But now the excitement has moved a bit farther north, to an area called Upper King, for its main thoroughfare, King Street. Here's where I decide to set up camp. My wife will be joining me in a couple of days—after I try out some new restaurants—so I snag a romantic berth in the William Aiken House (456 King St., 843-579-1810; doubles from $175). This elegant historic home is an event space, not a hotel, but I know the secret. There are two guest suites in the back carriage house, each decorated with antique furnishings and stocked with great Charleston Coffee Roasters coffee and fancy toiletries. Plus, it's near the fabulous WildFlour Pastry (73 Spring St., 843-347-2031; rolls from $3), where I breakfast on a cream cheese cinnamon roll—warm, flaky, glazed with frosting. Perfect.

A PORCH IS A PIZZA, AND OTHER FACTS

Instead of brie...SERVE BOILED PEANUTS AND CHEESE STRAWS.
Instead of eggs and bacon...BREAKFAST ON SHRIMP AND Grits.
Instead of a veranda...CALL YOUR PORCH THE PIZZA.
Instead of sesame seeds...REFER TO THEM AS BENNE SEEDS.
Instead of martini...DRINK FIRELY SWEET TEA VODKA ON THE ROCKS.
Shrimp and Grits
SERVES 4  PREP 20 MIN  COOK 1 HR

Adapted from Shrimp & Grits by Nathalie Dupree

4 tbsp butter
Salt and pepper
1 cup grits
34 cup heavy cream
1¼ lbs. kielbasa, thinly sliced
4 oz. country ham, cut into strips
8 sea scallops
12 medium shrimp, deveined
2 tomatoes, seeded and chopped
14 tsp. finely chopped garlic
14 cup chopped scallions
1 pinch cajun seasoning

1. In a heavy saucepan, bring 4 cups water to a boil. Add 1 tbsp. butter and 1¼ tsp. salt. Stir in the grits. Lower the heat, cover and simmer, stirring frequently, until tender, about 1 hour. Stir in the cream and 1 tbsp. butter.
2. Meanwhile, in a skillet, heat 1¼ tsp. butter over medium-high heat. Add the kielbasa and ham and cook until golden, 3 minutes; transfer to a plate. Melt 1¼ tsp. butter in the skillet, add half the scallops and shrimp and cook, turning once, for 3 minutes; transfer to the plate. Repeat with 1¼ tsp. butter and the remaining scallops and shrimp.
3. Add the remaining 1¼ tsp. butter to the skillet. Add the tomatoes, garlic, scallions, cajun seasoning, and pepper. Stir in the reserved seafood and meat and cook until heated through; season with salt and pepper. Serve the grits topped with the seafood-meat mixture.
New Kids on the Block

The most buzzed-about new restaurant on Upper King, right across the street from the inn, is the sushi bar O-Ku (483 King St. 843-737-0112; small plates from $5). Its old brick building belies a glossy, modern interior. From the ceiling hang enormous glowing lampshades, which make you feel like you’re dining on a landing pad. It’s a fun spot for a cocktail, like the Jasmanian Devil, a highball of habanero-infused rum with passion fruit and mint.

Save your appetite for the crunchily charred pizzas at nearby Monza (451 King St., 843-720-8757; pizzas from $11); they’re all named after sports-car drivers. (Try the Von Tris with house-made sausage and greens, and ask for an organic farm egg fried on top.) The owners have opened a gastropub next door called Closed for Business (453 King St., 843-833-8406; sandwiches from $6), which is funny because the joint stays open till 2 a.m. On the menu is a sandwich that piles a crisp pork cutlet on a challah bun, with house-smoked ham, Swiss cheese and green tomato chutney that tastes like it could have been made by an up-and-coming hipster artisan—or by his grandmother.

That’s the thing. These hot chefs and food producers are nothing if not respectful of their elders, and no one pays homage with as much gusto as Sean Brock at Husk Restaurant (76 Queen St., 843-577-2500; entrées from $22). I’m a huge fan of the showstoppingly intricate, high-tech cuisine Sean does at the upscale restaurant McCrady’s (for which he won a James Beard award in 2010), but I’m happy to see him cooking more affordable, easygoing fare at this restaurant, which opened in an 1893 Victorian mansion in November of last year. His goal here is nothing less than a total rebooting of Southern cuisine, using only ingredients from the region, many from his own nearby farm. Everyone needs to try the chicken skins, as well as the skillet of bacon cornbread that somehow tastes smokier, pickier and more bacony than actual bacon.

I linger at the table with Nathalie, who’s always a hoot. When she’s not telling tales of her “favorite ex-husband,” she’s filling me in on her latest cookbook, Southern Biscuits, and questioning Sean’s pickled okra. He may be a rebel with a full-sleeve tattoo and a canister of liquid nitrogen in his kitchen, but he respects tradition. Soon we’re poring over a binder filled with 18th-century pickle recipes: I love this kind of culi-nerd talk, but it would bore my non-foodie wife, though she would have loved the black-bottom pie, served in a canning jar. At meal’s end, I can’t decide whether I feel like I’ve pigged out at a Southern church supper or savored a tasting menu in a swank restaurant, but I guess that’s the point.

OVER THE 10 YEARS I’VE BEEN COMING to Charleston, I’ve never seen it so...on.

If Sean is the poster boy of the new Charleston food scene, Renata Dos Santos is the ghost. The Trinidad native started the secret supper club L.I.M.E. (limeincharleston.com; meals, with alcohol, from $75), which stands for Local Impromptu Moveable Evening. She taps graduates of the Culinary Institute of Charleston and pairs them with local farmers to stage dinners in evocative locations—on a dock or a downtown rooftop, or on a boat cruising the harbor. A local mixologist or sommelier gets into the act, so all you need to do is kick back and see the city through the eyes of the foodsters who love it best.

Searching for the Source

Sean and Renata (along with Robert Stehling at Hominy Grill and Frank Lee at Slightly North of Broad) have tweaked the canon of well-loved low-country recipes to better reflect the incredible local seafood and produce. I want to see those ingredients for myself, so the next morning I leave the downtown peninsula and head deep into the countryside.
FOOD AT THE GLASS ONION
isn't fancy. But man, is it tasty.

**CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT**

1. The sushi bar at O-Ru
2. Chicken liver mousse with pickled vegetables and red pepper relish, and deviled eggs, at The Glass Onion
3. An oyster shucker at Bowens Island
4. The newly renovated building at Bowens Island

Bowens Island eatery is a local institution, the place where locals go to find the freshest oysters around.
I drive east, across the Cooper River Bridge and past Shem Creek, to the boat of fisherman Mark Marhefska, a local folk hero responsible for the newly stylish status of triggerfish, a former trash fish. “Five years ago I was selling 10 percent of my catch locally and shipping the rest off to New York and Atlanta,” he tells me. “Today, thanks to these chefs, it’s more like 80 percent.”

Back in the car, I continue my behind-the-scenes food tour. I drive 40 minutes to sample not freshly picked peaches or just-made goat’s-milk ricotta. No, I’m traveling to taste some vodka. The Firefly Distillery (1775 Bears Bluff Road, 843-557-1405; tasting $6, includes shot glass) presents the kitschy side of the Charleston food renaissance. Here is the home of Sweet Tea Vodka, a sensation throughout the South and the creation of Jim Irvin, who started distilling local corn as a side project. It took off once he flavored it with tea leaves from the neighboring Charleston Tea Plantation (also a fun tour). Pick up a bottle of the Sweet Tea Bourbon that’s one muddled orange slice away from becoming a fabulous old-fashioned.

Local Fixation
Driving back into town, I pull over at the one restaurant that both Sean and Nathalie said I shouldn’t miss, The Glass Onion (1819 Savannah Hwy., 843-225-1717; lunch plates from $12). You won’t find a single tourist here, but you will see how food-obsessed the locals are. They line up inside this noisy joint to consider the dozens of daily items on the blackboard—andouille omelets, fried Gulf shrimp po’boys. “Was the fish line-caught? Where are the eggs from?” they ask of the counter help, who have an answer for everything. The vibe is casual, but the food sure isn’t; I try pan-seared triggerfish that’s sweet like swordfish but flaky like flounder. Silently, I thank fisherman Mark for convincing chefs that this fish is worth their time.

I CAN’T TELL IF I’VE PIGGED OUT AT
a Southern church supper or
savored a swank tasting menu.

My gorging is deemed null and void with a quick jog—at least that’s what I tell myself—and dinner is beer and oysters at Bowens Island (1870 Bowens Island Road, 843-795-3757; oysters market price), a dockside institution that burned to the ground in 2006 and, after four years, returned with a new building set high on pilings. I’m dying to see how it’s doing. I get the answer in the shape of an enormous mountain of oyster shells by the door. A burly guy piles cafeteria trays with “low-country clusters” of steamed oysters—great masses of bivalves stuck together like caramel corn. With a towel and an oyster knife, you open them, scoop out the sweet bites and dump the shells in a bucket.

Let the Romance Begin
I figure my wife, who arrives the next night, deserves a meal she doesn’t have to pry open. We dine at Trattoria Lucca (41-A Bogard St., 843-973-3323; entrées from $18), a small restaurant a half-mile north, in a neighborhood that’s still coming together with refurbished houses and new shops. My money’s on this area to be the next big thing, perhaps where Sean opens up his third restaurant.

Lucca casts a butter-yellow glow against its street corner. The enticing menu includes chef Ken Vedrinsk’s cauliflower fioruerto, a kind of custard that spills soft egg yolk when we cut it open. Golden beet carpaccio arrives flecked with pickled garlic, walnuts and chiles. Grilled trumpet mushrooms came from a local monastery. The most incredible dish is a bowl of hand-cut pasta with cubes of raw yellowfin tuna that color and soften when I give the dish a toss.

My wife is loving her plate of ceviche-like triggerfish crudo, dressed with bits of tangerine. This restaurant is so much more her speed than the formal joints I’ve dragged her to on trips past. Truth be told, it’s mine, too. Charleston has bustled out of the gate as the kind of food destination that’s just right for everyone.