

Romancing CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

By Susan Watkins

"It was my father who called the city the Mansion on the River. He was talking about Charleston, South Carolina, and he was a native son, peacock proud of a town so pretty it makes your eyes ache with pleasure just to walk down its spellbinding, narrow streets."

PAT CONROY, SOUTH OF BROAD

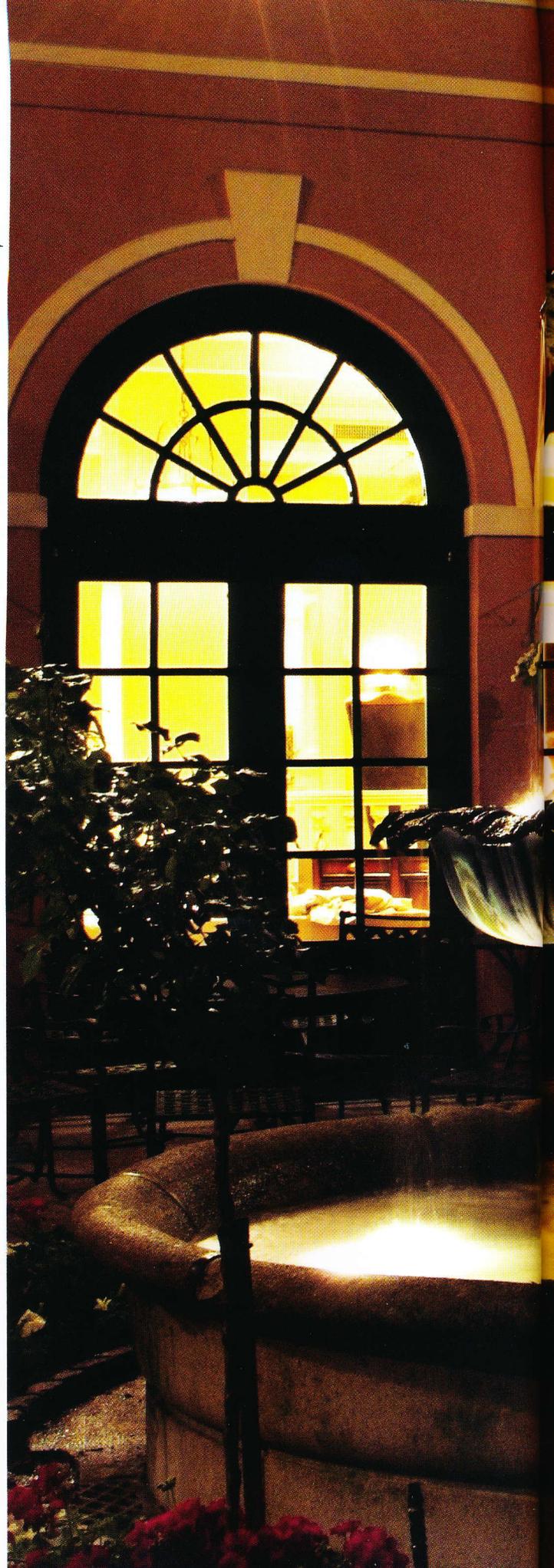
It's the colors that you notice first. Hazy golden light hangs over the steepled skyline of the city. Draw closer – there are mansions the hues of cotton candy, butter gracing cobblestone streets and silvery white church spires pointing proudly into the sky. Dark green gardens brim with blushing camellias, and in the near distance is the soft gray-green water of the Charleston Harbor. It is enough to make you think you're playing inside a watercolor painting.

Immediately, you notice the sounds of Charleston. Shhhhh....if you close your eyes and listen, you will hear the South whisper. The voices of history are strong and compelling here – even in the midst of today's modern and vibrant city. This colonial town bore witness to the very birth of our nation and also to the first shots fired at Ft. Sumter which began the War Between the States. The ghosts of Charleston murmur – its sea captains and merchants, great ladies and politicians, slaves and plantation owners. The graveyards are full of American patriots and Confederate heroes. As you walk Charleston's fabled streets, its rich heritage and storied past call out.

The salty scent of the Atlantic catches your senses when the breeze is just right. Two beloved rivers, the Ashley and the Cooper (pronounced "Cuppah" by those who live here) embrace the city, one on either side. At low tide, the earthy and distinctive smell of pluff mud rises. Just minutes outside the city, the tapestry of the Charleston lowcountry landscape is rich and varied. Beyond the pleasant peninsula on which this city dwells, legendary South Carolina barrier islands beckon, each island different from the next. Natural sanctuaries bountiful in woodlands, salt marsh estuaries and abundant wildlife, plus miles of sweetgrass beaches have, for residents and visitors alike, provided the setting for many a happy summer fling.

For four days we immersed ourselves in this lovely city. We took a horse drawn carriage through its streets. We walked here and there, peeking down shaded alleyways and gazing at hidden gardens through curly-cued ironwork gates. We strolled through the neighborhood known simply as "South of Broad", marveling at antebellum mansions so large they spread out across the land like an old fashioned lady's hoop skirt. We wandered along streets both narrow and grand, where we admired window flower boxes, churches, overgrown graveyards with crumbled mossy headstones, impressive red brick buildings and lacy tree canopied streets. We poked about art galleries, antique stores and glittering designer stores as we went. We shopped for Gullah spices, hot sauces and palmetto baskets. We sat in an old fashioned swing on the pier, legs dangling, eating peanuts as pelicans swooped over the scenic Charleston Harbor. We dined in world-class restaurants. We visited plantations from Southern days gone by. It was not long before we were utterly charmed by the beauty of this place.

Quite simply, we fell madly in love with Charleston.





AMERICA'S FAVORITE CITY

Many on the West Coast are just now discovering the immense attraction of Charleston, which has been named the nation's top destination city for three years running. We decided to pack our bags and head east to see what all the fuss was about. From Los Angeles, Charleston is an easy 5 hours by air. When you arrive, you'll be struck by the marked difference in culture and the welcome change of pace from "Life in the Fast Lane".

You've heard about Southern Charm, Southern Hospitality, Southern Comfort, and Southern Cookin'? Well, it all genuinely comes alive in Charleston. As we ventured out on our first day in this picturesque city we soon became accustomed to the polite nod of greeting and the smiling inquiry, "Welcome! Where y'all from?" The people of Charleston are unflinchingly proud of their city and its heritage, and it shows. They love to share it with visitors like us, who've come to prowl about its historic sites, dine in its acclaimed restaurants and soak in all the ambience of this old Southern city which I'm told is properly pronounced "Chahhhhl stun."

So, what's to love about Charleston? Let me count the ways:

PINEAPPLES AND PALMETTOS

In Charleston, the pineapple is a symbol of welcome and you see decorative images of pineapples all about town. Palmettos are the small palm trees which line its avenues and adorn its gardens. Look around - pineapples and palmettos are everywhere! They are saying, "Welcome - You're in Charleston!"

•Take a Horse Drawn Carriage Ride

A great way to orient yourself to the charms of the city, this nostalgic outing will slow your pace to the lazy rhythm of the horses' clip clop and provide you with the best seat in the house for viewing all the important places in the downtown and historic districts. Palmetto Carriage Tours, the oldest carriage company in Charleston, has fabulous guides with years of experience and is known for giving their horses tender loving care. As you go, soak in all the stories and tidbits of history that your guide will tell, and make a mental note of places you'd like to return to for a closer look.

•Promenade through White Point Gardens

Situated along the Battery, this idyllic park is named for the large mounds of white oyster shells that once covered this point. Meander beneath the shade of the giant oak trees, picnic under a gazebo, admire the antebellum architecture of the houses across the street, or gaze out to sea where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers meet.

•Pose at the Pineapple Fountain

Whether a friend snaps your picture or you're able to get a good selfie, a picture of you in front of this enduring Charleston symbol of welcome will be a favorite in your album.

•Walk along Rainbow Row

A distinctive strip of antebellum homes nicknamed for their pastel colors, these historic houses standing watch over the harbor are some of the most prominent architectural landmarks of Charleston.

•Sashay South of Broad

Row after row of impressive antebellum homes sit graciously along the streets of the residential neighborhood named for its location south of Broad Street. Behind delicate iron gates or lush courtyards, these beautiful homes all have a history. For fun, look for porch ceilings, shutters, doors and windowsills painted in a particular color of blue called "haint blue." Painting parts of your home in haint blue is a tradition which arose from the Gullah people, descendants of African slaves who worked the rice plantations long ago. The color is meant to protect against haints, or evil spirits.

•Get Up Close and Personal on a Walking Tour

You can find just about any kind of themed walking tour you might imagine here in Charleston. How about a Pirate Tour or a creepy night-time Ghost Tour? You can choose from Patriot Walks, Civil War Walks, Slave Walks, Historic Home Walks... you get the picture. Discovering your favorite places of cultural heritage and historical significance with an entertaining and expert guide will open up the world of Charleston to you.

HISTORIC HOMES

The homes and gardens of Charleston are a big part of its allure. Fortunately, you don't need to stand from afar and admire all of them from the sidewalk! We are grateful to The Historic Charleston Foundation which has opened the doors to history so that we can enjoy many of the historic homes which dot the city.

•Nathaniel Russell House

Regarded as one of the finest neoclassical dwellings anywhere in America, this home dating from Charleston's Golden Age features an impressive free-flying staircase, geometrically shaped rooms fully furnished in period pieces, and a grand collection of decorative and fine arts.

•Edmondston-Alston House

Commanding a spectacular view of Charleston Harbor, this home features stately wide piazzas from which General P.G.T. Beauregard watched the bombardment of Ft. Sumter in 1861. Pay a visit to this home and you'll be taken from one exquisite room to the next, all containing pieces of the family's 19th century furniture, books, family portraits and silver.

SHOPPING CHARLESTON STYLE

Whether you're looking for a unique keepsake from your visit, shopping for that special bauble or just love to browse, there's plenty in Charleston to satisfy the shopper within.

•King Street

The "Rodeo Drive" of Charleston, King Street is a shopper's paradise. On Lower King Street you'll find the antiques district where you can treasure hunt till your heart's content. Upper King Street boasts many of your favorite high-end designer stores, plus a multitude of one-of-a-kind boutique stores owned by merchants which have been here for generations, specializing in jewelry, silver, clothing, and classy gifts.

•Charleston City Market

This fun market is one of the oldest public markets in the United States. Start in the bright, air conditioned Great Hall, a long corridor containing a cavalcade of mini-shops owned by local vendors. Here you can buy Charleston delicacies – tea, jam, sweets, linens, glassware, quality Charleston keepsakes from the Historic Charleston Foundation, and some captivating local art. Venture a bit further into the covered open air sheds where you can shop for jewelry, scarves, t-shirts and best of all, traditional sweetgrass baskets, one of the region's most prized indigenous Gullah crafts. If you have a passion for spice, stop and chat with the Gullah grannies who will persuade you to buy their very own home-made fiery hot sauces. Woo Ha, they are HOT!

SOUTHERN COMFORT

Where to stay in Charleston? These two places really know how to roll out the red carpet for their guests.

•The Mills House Wyndham Grand Hotel - Here is a Grand Lady of a hotel if there ever was one! Charleston's best historic hotel is truly a landmark - everyone in town knows The Mills House. Its storied past includes venerable guests such as General Robert E. Lee, who stood on the balcony in 1861 and watched as a great fire swept through Charleston. Situated in a prime location on the corner of Meeting and Queen Streets, everything you could want to see in historic and downtown Charleston is within walking distance. The hotel is instantly recognizable with its bright terra cotta color and ornate wrought-iron balconies.

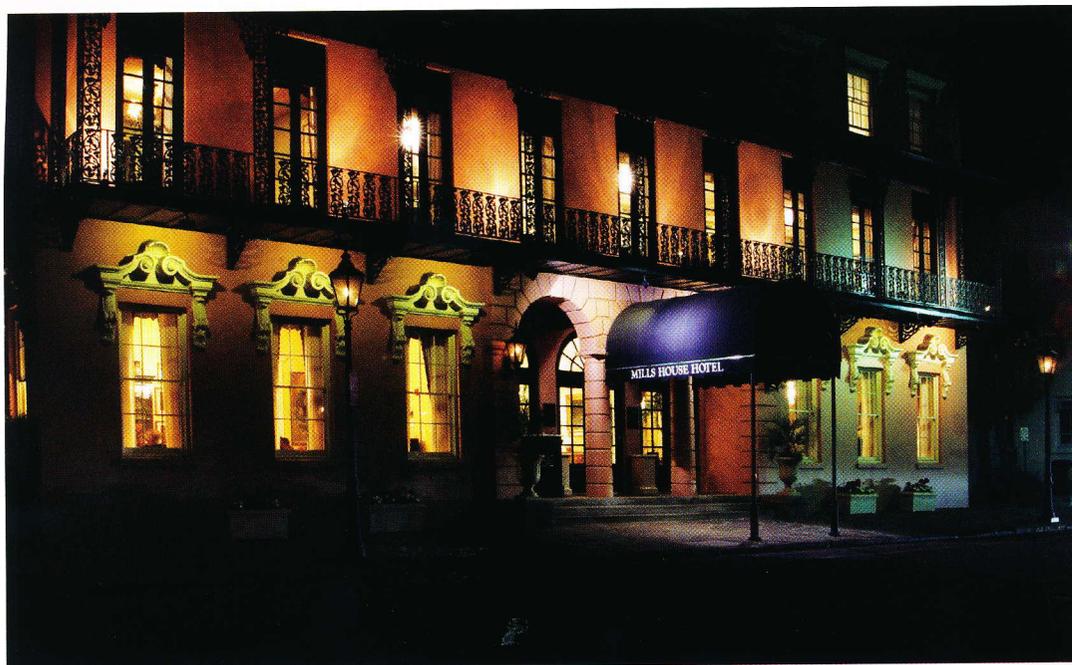
The Mills House is beautifully restored and the public rooms feature elegant colonial décor in cream and russet tones. The hotel's lobby and courtly parlors show off opulent chandeliers, original artwork from the 17th and 18th centuries and a fine collection of stately antique furniture which are treasures not only to The Mills House, but to all the good people of Charleston.

Newly remodeled guest rooms are lovely in the restful palettes of the color of water – aqua blues, greens and golds. All of the

comforts of home are here. An upper room facing onto the front of the hotel will treat you to a spectacular view of the Charleston skyline, Ravenel Bridge, Charleston Harbor and Ft. Sumter in the distance.

The elegance of this hotel is matched only by the cordial hospitality of the exceptional staff. Efficient and courteous, they know all about Charleston and are a wonderful resource for recommendations.

Enjoy a drink in the First Shot Lounge, named for the first shot fired at Ft. Sumter which commenced the Civil War. Overlooking the peaceful fountain courtyard, it is the perfect setting for sipping a pre-dinner cocktail and reminiscing about your day's activities. Don't miss having



at least one meal in the adjoining Barbadoes Room restaurant. For a tried and true low-country breakfast here, order the shrimp and grits.

The aura of the Mills House calls to memory the wistful statement of Rhett Butler, who said "I'm going back to Charleston, where there is still a little grace and civility left in the world." A stay at The Mills House will immerse you in the history and gentility of Charleston like no other place.

•Wentworth Mansion - Indulge yourself in the lap of luxury at this intimate five star boutique hotel. Located in a quiet downtown neighborhood just minutes from the historic district, you'll feel like you are a world away - kiss your cares goodbye and sink into the pampered life at Wentworth Mansion!

If you are fortunate enough to stay here you will feel every bit like a Royal. Our spacious and utterly enchanting Suite Nine featured a king sized bed with decorative canopy, luxurious linens, wood parquet floors, a hand carved marble fireplace for romantic evenings, antique armoire, vintage chandeliers, oriental carpets, wood paneled walls, Scarlett O'Hara green velvet draperies, a comfortable library to curl up with a good book, a spacious bathroom with double sinks, two-person whirlpool tub and enormous shower, and a sun porch looking out on to the gardens.

The mansion is simply breathtaking. Bask in the serenity and splendor of this place. Note the beautifully preserved historic features of the home including the inlaid floors, classic moldings and the grand staircase fit for a King (or Queen!). Take a glass of wine to the rooftop cupola for an unparalleled 360 degree sunset view of the fabled skyline of Charleston. In the mornings, make it a point to see the sun illuminate the amber and sapphire glass of the vintage Tiffany windows over the entry doors.

A stay at Wentworth Mansion includes an evening wine and hors d'oeuvres reception as well as a full complimentary breakfast. Even bedtime at the Wentworth Mansion is an occasion. In the parlor, you'll find evening port, sherry and brandy set out on gleaming silver service, and house-made chocolates will be waiting in your room. So go ahead - live a little! Pour yourself a nightcap, light up the fireplace, snuggle up in your cushy robe, savor your chocolate, and prepare to dream.

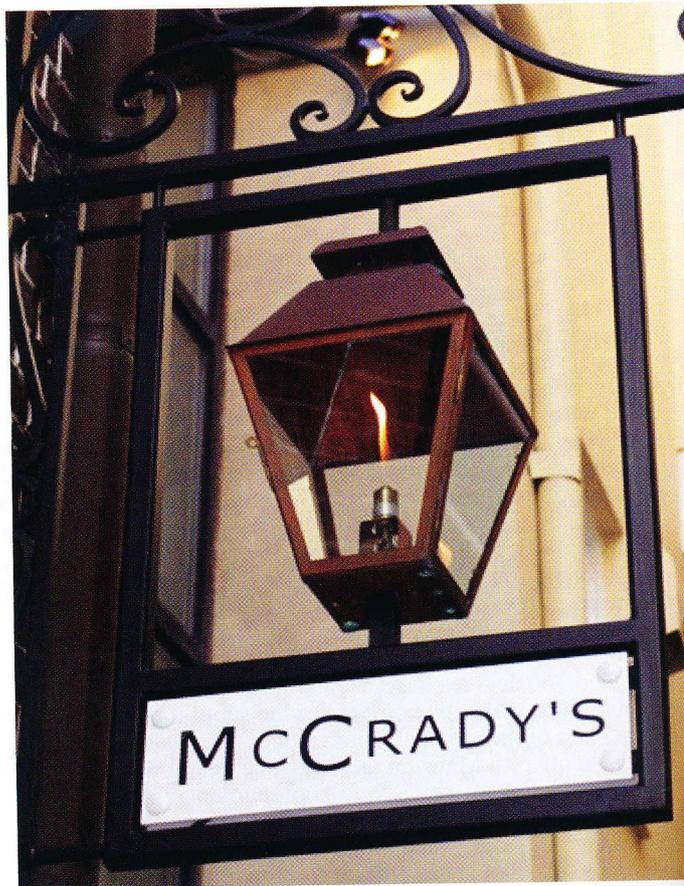


CHARLESTON CUISINE

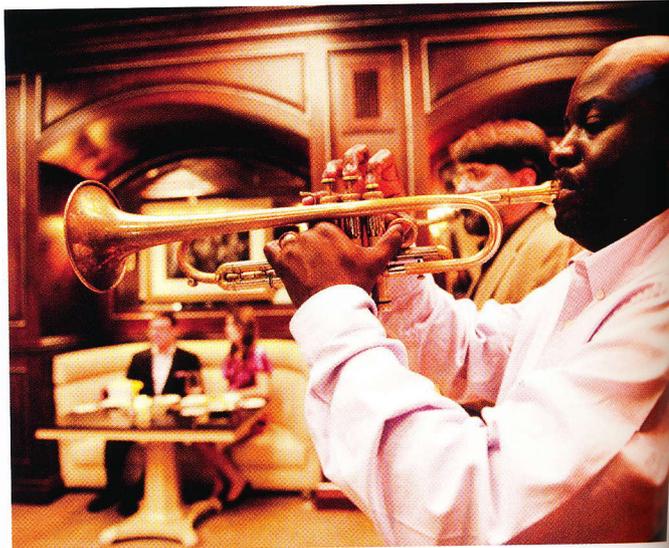
Charleston has established itself as a thriving culinary destination in its own right and you'll find way more here than the stereotypical heavy "Southern" food. When you're in Charleston, be sure to sample some of the signature dishes for which it is known: Shrimp & Grits, Pimento Cheese, She Crab Soup, Benne Wafer Cookies, Tomato Pie, Fresh Oysters, Fried Green Tomatoes, Sweet Tea and any kind of cocktail with Bourbon!!

Here's a rundown of the best places to partake in the Charleston culinary scene:

•McCrary's Restaurant - The historic setting is enough to take your breath away. Located in a venerable brick tavern which dates back to the American Revolution, McCrary's is on the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural and political significance. If the walls could talk here, maybe you would hear the voice of George Washington, who attended a banquet in his honor here in 1791. Steeped in this kind of tradition, you know you are in a special place. Fast forward to 2014, add renowned Chef Sean Brock, an innovative menu, exceptional service and creative cocktails to the mix and you've got Southern fine dining at its best. McCrary's is known for its changing menu which offers food fresh from local farms. Try the four course tasting menu. The night we were there, our table especially enjoyed a Duo of Berkshire Pork with butternut squash, burnt honey and black truffle and an Aged Duck, roasted on the bone with sweet potato, oats, basil and black garlic. For dessert, a refreshing serving of Frozen Parfait of Grits with Huckleberry proves that they can do anything with grits here in Charleston!



•Charleston Grill – Swanky. Romantic. Sexy. Perfect for a special occasion, or anytime you just want to indulge! This is a classy restaurant, where easy Southern manners reign. The impressive dining room feels old-world and features tables dressed in snowy white linen and soft lighting. To complete the full Charleston experience, a cool live jazz trio serenades diners nightly. The menu is inventive, the service is impeccable and the food is out of this world. Chef Michelle Weaver's menu is cleverly divided into four sections, offering fare which is categorized as Pure (simple dishes featuring clean, light flavors), Lush (lavish food in the French tradition), Cosmopolitan (exotic dishes from around the globe) and Southern (contemporary interpretations of lowcountry favorites). Diners can mix and match from any area on the menu to create their perfect dining experience. As an appetizer, please please please order the Charleston Grill Crab Cake with creek shrimp and lime tomato dill vinaigrette. Pure chunks of sweet delicious crab without the bread fillers, they are like no crab cakes you've ever tasted! Oyster lovers will appreciate the Roasted Oysters with kimchi hollandaise, bacon and spinach. Our main courses, Butter Poached Lobster with uni butter, pappardelle pasta, toasted garlic and brioche crumbs and the Grilled Domestic Lamb Rack with winter vegetables, mint chimichurri and lamb jus were stylishly presented and so delicious we couldn't bear to leave even one bite on our plates. For a different dessert, order the Rice Pudding Fritters with hazelnut caramel, milk chocolate, balsamic and cocoa sorbet. An evening here will be one of your favorite Charleston memories, we promise



•Caviar & Bananas Gourmet Market and Cafe– Situated between the stylish shopping district of King Street and Charleston College, this busy bistro is the perfect place to stop for lunch, coffee or a quick bite. As its name suggests, Caviar & Bananas offers everything from scrumptious gourmet food to a simple snack. This humming market and café features a sushi bar, bakery, a large selection of specialty foods and made to order creations such as cheese & charcuterie boards, sandwiches and salads. Guests can shop for boutique wine, spices and other gourmet items while they help themselves to an artisanal



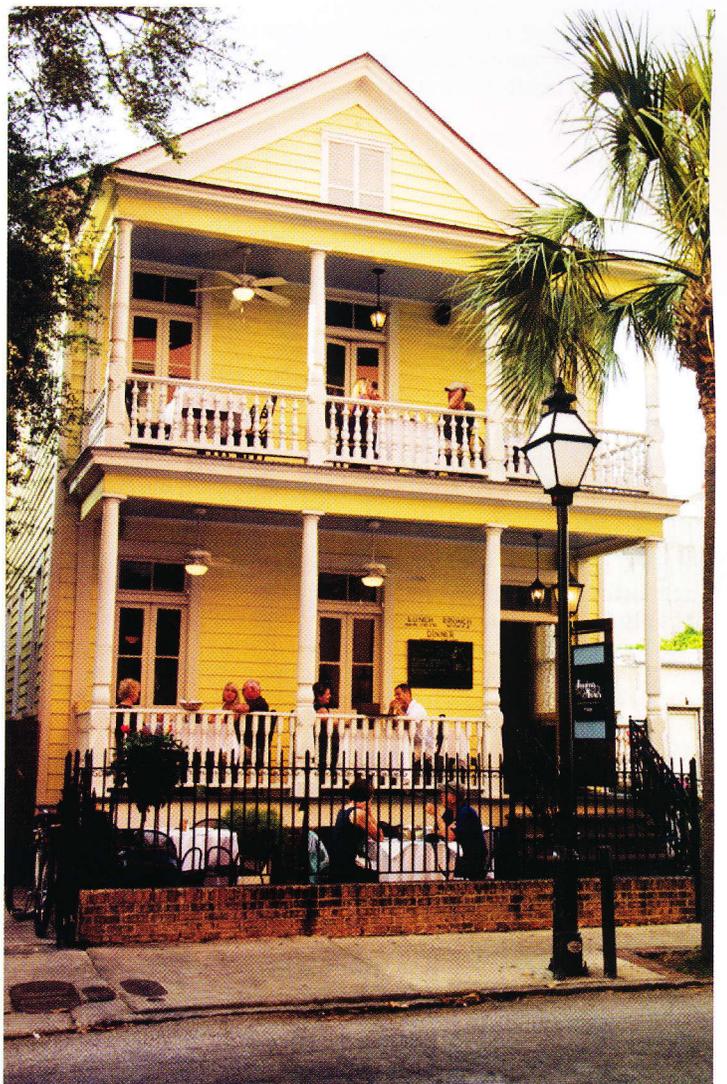
coffee, glass of wine, or a full meal. Try the Housemade Pimento Cheese Plate with pickled vegetables and crostini and the popular “Naked” Kale Salad with almonds, cranberries, blueberries, aged Gouda, grape tomatoes and lemon vinaigrette. The success of Caviar & Bananas in Charleston is evidenced by the recent opening of its second walk-up location in the historic City Market Great Hall.

•High Cotton – “High Cotton: An old Southern idiom meaning you’re well off, especially in terms of happiness or wealth.” At High Cotton, you’re invited into a world where the livin’ is easy, and there’s always somethin’ good coming out of the kitchen. The proprietors of this restaurant tell you that a meal here will immerse you in “High Steppin’ Lowcountry Living.” Indeed, here you can “set a spell” and enjoy the ambiance of the posh dining room’s historic antique brick walls, wood floors, palmetto ceiling fans, needlepoint upholstered chairs and artwork depicting the great Southern love of horse racing. The menu specializes in local lowcountry fare, and is accompanied by a fine wine list. We recommend the Buttermilk Fried Oysters with green goddess dressing, the Fried Brussels Sprouts with smoked paprika aioli, and the Bacon Wrapped Stuffed Rabbit Loin with pimento cheese grits, grilled baby carrots, cherry pistachio pâté and rosemary infused jus. After dinner, drift along East Bay Street and soak up the charisma of Charleston at night. Life is good at High Cotton!

•Blossom – Known for its extensive selection of fresh seafood presented in true lowcountry fashion, this is absolutely the place to order Shrimp and Grits! The combination of tender fragrant shrimp, white cheddar grits, spicy creole butter and scallions will make you want to stand up and shout “Amen!” The restaurant is fresh and modern with flowers on every table and open lemon colored walls which flow onto a pleasing outdoor dining porch. While seafood is the heart and soul of this kitchen, the menu also features interesting appetizers such as Sorghum Glazed Barbecued Pork Belly with jalapeño & bourbon peach jam, salsa verde, and wood oven pizzas. A popular restaurant with visitors and locals alike, the dinner menu kicks it up a notch to make Blossom one of Charleston’s all time favorites.

•Hall’s Chophouse – This top rated steak and chop house is run by the Hall family, who were happy to tell us all about their strong California roots. William Hall presides as the patriarch here and his sons Billy and Tommy have made their Mama proud with this handsome restaurant, greeting each and every guest with a hearty Southern welcome. Dark paneled walls and cushy cognac leather booths set the stage in this dignified dining room. The menu features a tempting array of steaks and chops and a mile-long wine list, and it’s all served in a lively environment. For an appetizer you won’t forget, order the LowCountry Fried Green Tomatoes with crab, shrimp and bacon succotash. With the best steak you’ll ever eat, be sure to try a couple of Hall’s most talked about side dishes – we loved the Pepperjack Creamed Corn. Save room for dessert – the Whiskey Bread Pudding with sun dried cherries, pecans & bourbon crème anglaise is a delectable treat. Ladies, as you leave, you may receive a gallant kiss on the hand from one of the Hall brothers, a gracious Southern custom which has not lost its charm.

•Poogan’s Porch – Situated in a restored Victorian Charleston residence, Poogan’s Porch bears the name of a previous owner’s pup, Poogan, who sunned himself on the porch of this home in years past. You’ll find traditional lowcountry dishes here at this restaurant which is a favorite with the locals. We stopped in for lunch and ordered the She Crab Soup with dry sherry & chive oil and lump crab, the Fried Green Tomato Sandwich with goat cheese and applewood bacon and the Fried Chicken Sliders with buttermilk biscuits. Accompanied by an icy glass of sweet tea this is the food that just plain old comforts your heart. Hint: keep your eye out for the ghost of a lady in black said to haunt this place. As they say at Poogan’s Porch, you may go home with a ghostly tale!





CHARLESTON AT NIGHT
 Charleston after dark is simply magic. Lamps light the streets with a shimmery glow; restaurants and clubs come alive with the best in food, cocktails and entertainment. Take in one of these things to do! Or, simply enjoy a moonlight stroll on the pier and let the kiss of saltwater breezes put you in the mood for romance.

•**Roof Top Bars**
 Charleston's enviable location right on the water and its temperate evening weather make it a hot spot for roof top bars. For a romantic beginning or end to your evening, take your sweetheart out under the stars, order a cocktail, enjoy some music and gaze at the lights of the city. It's the thing to do here!

•**Cocktails at Husk**

If you can't make it to this highly regarded restaurant for dinner, at least stop in next door at the atmospheric The Bar at Husk. In this rustic brick edifice, we climbed up the rough hewn wooden stairs to the second floor to find quite a cozy bar. Here you can snuggle up with your honey in a big backed booth upholstered in red and silver polka dots, look out the large windows onto Queen Street, and toast Charleston with a classic Light Dragoon's Punch or some of the most impressive selections of bourbon found in town.

•**Coconut Cake at Peninsula Grill**

Top the night off with a decadent piece of the Peninsula Grill's renowned five layer coconut cake. We were not fortunate enough to have dinner at one of Charleston's most acclaimed dining establishments (hoping for next time!), but we did stop in to share a piece of their famous confection. It lives up to its reputation. You must have it. It's a part of the Charleston experience.

PLANTATION TEMPTATION

No trip to Charleston is complete without a visit to at least one plantation. Just a few minutes outside of the city lay acres of rich farmland and the remnants of prosperous rice plantations from lofty days gone by.

•**Middleton Place**

Step back in time at Middleton Place, where you can still envision what lowcountry plantation life must have been like. Here you can tour all aspects of the plantation including fascinating excursions into the fields and stables, observing working artisans such as blacksmiths and potters. You'll enjoy touring the house museum which is full of rare artifacts, such as a hand written pass signed by Abraham Lincoln, allowing a Middleton daughter-in-law safe passage through Union lines. You'll see many portraits of members the prominent and influential Middleton family, including Arthur Middleton, who signed the Declaration of Independence, his son Henry who served as governor of South Carolina, and his grandson, Williams who became a signer of the Ordinance of Secession, sparking the Civil War. The crowning glory of Middleton Place is its lavish gardens, which are the oldest landscaped gardens in America. Recline under the shade of massive Spanish oaks dripping with moss, mosey down camellia allées into secret gardens and wonder at the expansive emerald green terraces overlooking the Ashley River.

•**Drayton Hall**

Drayton Hall is one of the finest surviving colonial houses in the nation, and the only enduring example of Georgian Palladian architecture in the U.S. This historical treasure is intact after weathering not only the American Revolution where the British used it as a staging ground, but the Civil War as well. When all other plantation homes on the Ashley River were burned by the Yankees, Drayton Hall was spared. Since then, it has withstood the great earthquake of 1886 and the devastation of hurricane Hugo in 1989. Instead of restoring the home, the trustees have opted to preserve it in its near-original condition. Today, Drayton Hall still stands much as it stood in the 18th century. It should not be missed.

•**Magnolia Plantation and Gardens**

Before you tour the home and gardens at Magnolia, you can view an inspirational film on the history of the family which has owned this property over generations. Enjoy the abundant flowering gardens on foot or via nature train. Other options are a boat tour along Magnolia's old flooded rice fields and the exhibition "From Slavery to Freedom" which features former slave dwellings and an award winning program on African-American history.

PLEASE COME AGAIN

With every invitation from our newfound Charleston friends to return, I realized that indeed, Charleston had stolen a piece of my heart. Even now, I am drawn to return and renew my love affair with this charming city. That's what's to love about Charleston!