Southern Hospitality
Charleston, SC.

By Steve Miller
If Charleston, South Carolina had a politically incorrect office in its chamber of commerce, Jon Whitley would be its leader.

"I’m into alcohol, firearms and tobacco," says Whitley, owner of five of the city’s cigar lounges and stores and a former Green Beret who also owns a gun shop in suburban Mt Pleasant.

He stands behind the counter of his Coastal Firearms on a spring morning preparing for the day, a Springfield .45mm on his right hip and freshly lit cigar in his left hand. He’s just poured a visitor a sample of some home brewed, 130-proof brandy, a concoction he created from the remnants of bottles of wine from his lounges.

Whitley’s first customer of the day pulls up in a shiny blue customized Corvette and buys hundreds of dollars in ammo. The sun is shining, a breeze ripples the grove of oaks outside the shop and the temps are going to hit the 80s.

It’s already looking like a good day.

Charleston is a town that lures visitors by the millions each year with good days, consistently ranking near the top of travel polls as a go-to destination for travelers. For decades, Charleston has been considered a must-see place for a complete Southern culture sweep, a reputation that gives it a larger-than-life image.

And this bastion of the Old South has lots of room for feisty individualists like Whitley, who has smoked cigars since Reagan was president.

The lowland setting of Charleston - about 9 feet above sea level - gives way to diverse sightseeing that features famed plantations and a harbor area that highlights Fort Sumter where the Civil War began in 1861. Harbor cruises are among the most popular attractions, sunset sails and dolphin watching optional.

The city also offers a familiar downtown area: If Broadway in Nashville, Beale Street in Memphis, 6th Street in Austin and Bourbon Street in New Orleans are your things, a long night of loud revelry on King Street is for you. Food, booze and live music makes evenings in Charleston a festival for the senses. But that night scene is a contrast to the laid-back vibe of the city, and doesn’t reflect the sensitive and refined culture that defines the folks who live here.

Refined means little without some primo cigar experience, and Charleston checks that box as well, from the long oak bar at Whitley’s Charleston Cigar Experience & Wine on King Street, in the middle of the tourist megalopolis, to the smaller confines of King’s Leaf Cigar Lounge a few blocks south.

Both Whitley and King’s Leaf have locations outside of the downtown.
where locals plunk down and smoke and talk and work. It's a necessity in a tourist town; ensure a presence on the well-traveled path of visitors but make sure the hometown folks have a place to enjoy the cigar life where they live.

On King Street, "we get all kinds of people coming in to smoke with all different levels of experience," Whitley says. "In the other stores, there are more regulars and people who smoke more frequently."

Complementing the cigars is the restaurant scene. The city has long been known as a foodie haven, featuring dozens of quality places to eat, both low and high brow. It's a competitive market; the state was featured by Anthony Bourdain in a 2007 No Reservations episode, and two of the Charleston eateries featured on the program are now closed.

Clockwise from top: King's Leaf Cigar and Lounge: The humidor at King's Leaf; a glass of red from the solid wine selection at Charleston Tobacco and Wine: King Street.

time, and starting in May, you can wander down to the ports and see the boats come in, brimming with the day's catch.

We get a few Lowcountry oysters that were pulled by locals from up to 18 feet down, to get an idea of what they offer - a briny flavor that only the smaller oyster can deliver.

To the oysters we add a popular Darling dish, the creole shrimp, which offers a generous heap of smallish crustaceans over rice that wits into a tasty risotto under a tangy, mustard-based sauce. The sauce is a lesser-known local flavor dating back to the state's German settlers. It usually bakes in the shadow of more heralded items including the bountiful shrimp, but restaurants take pride in their mustard sauce. The Darling has something to crow about, as its heavy reliance on the condiment over its richer counterparts in Memphis, for example, makes a nice dent in the palette. Add to the meal some kale slaw tossed in a buttermilk dressing and dashed with sliced carrots and it's a full dinner. The kale is uncooked and stiff, and even the most ardent greens grazers may not dig the texture. Yet it tastes so fresh and clean that the dressing should have come on the side.

After dinner, we stroll south and find Nick Howard, the manager of King's Leaf Cigar Lounge, sifting through stacks of boxes of cigars, mostly major brands, that stuff his compact humidor. The downtown store, one of three King's Leaf locations, is a Needful Things of cigars, weathered and homely, crammed in a lived-in way. The leather chairs are cracking in places, the chess tables are creepy and the decor is mid-20th Century museum, with vintage signs, cigar boxes and rustic light fixtures, along with ceiling fans lazily swinging as they turn.

We grab a Punch Classico and a chair and watch the parade of folks come in, most of them from other places. A couple guys are talking some time down from a convention, another guy from Myrtle Beach mentions he's been here a few times. Concerns about what can
Top to bottom: The Darling Oyster Bar sits on prime real estate on King St.; The Darling’s Seafood Platter is as impressive as it gets.

be transported on an airplane come from a couple guys buying some
smokes.

"The town itself is a tourist-based economy," Howard says. "We get
some locals here but everyday lives and dies with tourism and
Charleston is always voted as one of the top tourist destinations in
America. So that’s this location."

Downtown King’s Cigar is about
1,500 square feet, while the other
locations range to 3,000 square
feet.

One of those other places is “across
the bridge,” as Howard calls it.
Which reminds us that Charleston
is a peninsula, sandwiched between
two rivers, the Cooper and the
Ashley, with the Atlantic Ocean a
straight shot through the harbor.

For a run to the King’s Leaf in
West Ashley, we’re joined by Tom
Peterson and his son Eric, who
have made the two-hour drive from
Hilton Head, where the Petersons
run Carolina Cigars.

Tom is an ebullient, glass-half-full
guy who has fallen into his dream
and never fails to take the time to
appreciate it. He spent 16 years as
a commodities trader in Chicago,
followed that up with 23 years as a
Chicago fireman, and in early 2020,
bought Carolina Cigar.

“It’s been a dream come true to be
here and be in this business,” Tom
says. He’d been to Hilton Head on
vacation and liked it so much he
bought a house there, renting it
out with the idea to live in it after
retirement. The local cigar shop had
been in business since 2008 and
he’d stop in when he was in town.

“If you ever want to sell this place,
let me know,” he told the owner
at one point. Peterson worried,
just what if it happened, what if he
really called. Was he ready to spend
his life in Chicago and be a cigar
merchant?

In early 2020, the call came.

“I knew why he was calling when
I looked at my phone and I almost
drove off the road,” Peterson says.
“I was ready to take the chance.”

He, Eric and his wife, Carrie, run
the shop, which has done better
than he dreamed.

“It’s the best job I ever had,” he
says.

The West Ashley King’s Leaf Cigar
Lounge that is 15 minutes off the
peninsula is a different world than
the downtown establishment. It’s
a large, clubby open room with
hardwood floors, set in a strip mall.
There is a pool table, a dartboard
and two Golden Tee video games to
one side, a long series of leather
chairs to the other, with coffee
tables strewn with Car and Driver
magazines. The humidor is beefy,
and the booze is a solid selection
of canned beer, a couple of drafts,
or wine. South Carolina cigar lounges
are hamstrung by a law that
requires food to be served in order
to allow liquor.

We pull something from the humidor
- I get a favorite, a Tabernacle
Havana Seed CT #142, and watch
the locals, Golf is on the televisions,
as required by law, while a couple
guys work on their smokes and
laptops at the same time. Another
couple guys in deck shoes come in
from the links and grab some cans
of Cigar City Jai Alai IPA and some
sticks. Yet another guy works over the Golden Tee machine. It’s 1:30 in the afternoon and the sun shines in.

“The other two stores we have are more hometown regulars, everyday guy type of places that are more like Cheers, with lounge rats and all,” Howard says.

It’s time to eat and the state’s favorite dish is on the menu.

Shrimp and grits is the elephant in the room, food-wise, when you get here.

To begin with, grits are crucial for the state. So much so that in 2000, a bill was introduced in the statehouse to make grits the official state food of South Carolina.

The bill declared that “every community in the State of South Carolina used to be the site of a grist mill and every local economy in the State used to be dependent on its products and grits has been a part of the life of every South Carolinian…”

Top to bottom: The Historic Charleston City Market: Pan roasted jumbo sea scallops at the Peninsula Grill

Bourdain during his 2007 visit.

“It started with people sending their kids to get shrimp, which is everywhere here, and they would come home and that would be breakfast, shrimp and grits,” Rogers says. “Then someone elevated it and you can get it with spices, sausage, all kinds of things.”

Slightly North of Broad – we love the acronym it goes by, SNOB - is a converted warehouse in the lower reaches of the tourist district. It’s got a big wooden bar, white tablecloths and a wide open kitchen at the back with a chef’s table.

It’s time to check into this Carolina favorite.

The shrimp and grits came with ham and sausage that joined the shrimp atop the bed of grits. While some grits are creamy and massaged as to become a soup, these were in between, firm to the tooth as a good al dente pasta should be. The smokish shrimp were excellent, chewy and full of flavor. The only thing lacking was spice, always a culinary conundrum in a tourist area. A side of hot sauce, which was Texas Pete, oddly, brought the plate to life.

My experience with shrimp and grits is limited. But I still remember, after almost 20 years, a plate of the stuff I had at a now-defunct restaurant/bar next to a railroad track in Starke, Florida, the name of which I cannot recall. It was magnificent enough to stick with me. Catching up to that is a tall order.

A 10-minute walk north from SNOB is Llanos Dos Palmas Cigars, but if you’re looking for a post-meal smoke, forget it. This place is a tiny storefront and a big window into the rolling of cigars. The only thing to let you know what’s behind the door is a single word on the plate glass window facing the street: Cigars.

While the face of the shop is unwelcoming, walk inside and you’re greeted first by a black-and-white bulldog, then by a friendly-faced woman who welcomes you in Spanish, then turns back to toll at a rolling table next to her gentleman colleague, who never looks up from his rolling.

The small room is filled with plastic bins of tobacco, leaves hanging, and the floor littered and display cases jammed with the stuff. On the counter sits trays packed with cigars of all kinds and sizes, including Double Corona, Churchill, Torpedo, Robusto, and Petite. In addition to the singles, they’re available in bundles and boxes.

The place buzzes with hurry, and it’s a lot to take in with one gender. Between the leaves, the rollers, the dog, the amazing selection and the rather impatient fellow behind the counter, we’re looking and feeling like tourists rather than the seasoned smokers we are.

Llanos Dos Palmas is one of a few U.S. establishments, probably under 100, that hand roll in-house, and that in Charleston, South Carolina, there are at least two people who put “cigar roller” on their IRS tax form, making it a special thing.

For the record, the Panatela with the Ecuador Connecticut wrapper that I grab turns out to be excellent. Go to Llanos Dos Palmas for the smokes, not the socializing.

More affable is Charlestonne Tobacco’s Jon Whitley, Charleston’s cigar maestro, gunsmith and lounge
owner, who owns Charlestonwine
Tobacco & Wine and four other
 cigar establishments in addition to
Coastal Firearms.

Whitely, 56, spent two decades in
military service and was deployed
around the world, leaving with the
rank of major. His first cigar was
a Tampa Nugget he smoked during
basic training in 1982. He kept with
the low rent smoke until he got a
lesson in upscale.

"In 1985 I was in officer candidate
school out on field exercise and lit a
cigar, to keep the bugs off," Whitely
recalls.

His commander came by and asked
what he was smoking and when
sewing the cheap smoke, pulled it
from Whitely's mouth, threw it on
the ground and stomped it out.

"I thought he was against me
smoking, but instead, he reached
into his pocket and pulled out an H.
Umpmann and gave it to me," Whitely
says. "And I've been smoking
premium cigars ever since."

When he settled down, the native
of Fort Mill, South Carolina found
work in Charleston. Whitely was an
HVAC guy selling cigars to bars
and restaurants on the side when
he realized that being a midwman
wasn't for him.

"I opened my first store in 1999,
and saw a lot of opportunity around
here," he says. At the time, he was
a volunteer deputy sheriff with the
Charleston County Sheriff's
Department, working with the
SWAT and undercover narcotics
teams.

"We all smoked together and I
thought I could make this work." Whitley's shops all have a modest yet
upscale touch, with the furniture
clean and new, beer and wines that
are fine but not fussy, and the cigar
selection wide without pandering.

It personifies Charleston, a place
where you can get dirty without
trying, and still enjoy the better
things.

His downtown lounge is a narrow,
well-restored storefront with
exposed brick walls and ceiling,
hardwood floors, a long bar and a
primary humidor at the back with
two more brand new humidor cases
stocking the overflow.

He's got nine reds by the glass and
plenty of bottles, complemented by
a smaller selection of whites and
sparkling wines, as well as a wide
array of beers by the bottle and on
tap.

We're drawn immediately by the
Palomino Soccorro Robusto, a
heavy hitter made for Whitely by
Alex Bradley and brought to market
in 2015.

Later that evening, we find Halls
Chophouse for a late dinner. It's
a noisy, teeming two-story with a
classic menu and likewise classic
service. We're seated upstairs
and the roar in the room, bouncing
off a brick wall, makes conversation
lively and animated, at the least.

The wine list is a book, suitably
heavy on the reds, with the
international divided into northern
and southern hemisphere and the
domestics leaning on Napa Valley.

The square is also the original site
of The Citadel military college,
opened in 1842 with 20 students
and now housed a couple miles
away with 3,700 students. But if
the history makes your eyes cross,
the scenery opens them, as the
vast courtyard comes in a shade
of bright green that throbs with
intensity, the outer ring of the park
ringed with palm trees, fountains
and monuments.

It's a good place to enjoy a smoke
and let the sun do its thing.

The Charleston cigar market is
varied enough that there are plenty
of options and room to grow. King's
Leaf handles the young adult crowd
while Charlestonne takes a lot of
tourists and older smokers.

"It's competitive, but I don’t pay
attention," Whitely says. "I just
focus on what I need to do, try to
keep innovative and give the other
guys their niche."

For Howard at King's Leaf, "we
don't actively try to find a [young
adult] customer, but it's more of a
trend. We've seen that demographic
come in our shops, which is fine - you
need new blood if you want to move
forward."

On the way out of Mt. Pleasant,
looking for a quick bite, we hit the
Sea Cree Restaurant, a Jon Whitley
recommendation. It's a former
gener store that dates back 100
years, with weathered, well,
evverything. It teeters when you
walk, and a generous back porch
has plenty of room to sprawl with a
bowl of excellent tomato-based fish
stew and an iced tea (unsweetened,
yes, I'm a Yankee). The stew is
flavored with white rice and the Sea
Wee is as unpretentious as Whitely.

It's a fitting sendoff from a region
of the country that is content with
itself, hardly trying to be something
it's not and populated by people
who mostly follow that same
sentiment.

People say Charleston is getting
fancy and expensive, and if so,
that's the progress that it wants.
For us short timers, it's no worry,
as the next place is just a few
minutes away. Meanwhile, we leave
with a memory of good smoking,
fine food, excellent company and a
place with a rich history. ★
CIGARS

1. Charlestowne Tobacco & Wine
   King St.
   561 King St
   tccacigars.com

2. Charlestowne Tobacco & Wine
   14 Exchange St
   tccacigars.com

3. King's Leaf Cigar Lounge - Downtown
   480 King St Suite B
   kinglotofcigars.com

4. Llanos Dos Palmas Handmade
   Cigars
   52 Wentworth St
   llanoscigars.com

FOOD

5. The Darling Oyster Bar
   513 King St
   thedarling.com

6. Slightly North of Broad
   Restaurant
   162 E Bay St
   snobcharleston.com

7. Halls Chophouse
   434 King St
   hallscirhouse.com

8. The Grocery
   4 Cannon St
   thegrocerycharleston.com

9. Peninsula Grill
   112 N Market St
   peninsula Grill.com

LANDMARKS AND ATTRACTIONS

10. Marion Square
    325 Meeting St
    charlestonparkconservancy.org

11. Historic Charleston City Market
    188 Meeting St
    thecharlestoncitymarket.com