



TRUE GRITS

Savoring Charleston One Bite at a Time

Written by Bridget Williams



Even though I left Charleston months ago, it is still with me. I am not talking about the indelible memories, photographs or souvenirs picked up along the way, but rather the few pounds I happily acquired over a week of overindulging in some of the best cuisine I have experienced in recent memory.

For a city of its size, the area boasts a disproportionate number of culinary luminaries. In fact, for three consecutive years, a Charleston chef has brought home the esteemed James Beard Foundation Best Chef Award. Hominy Grill's Robert Stehling won Best Southeastern Chef in 2008. The torch was passed to FIG's Mike Lata (2009), who handed it off to McCrady's Sean Brock (2010).



Widely regarded as Charleston's finest hotel, home base for our visit was Charleston Place, located in the historic heart of the city. The elegant 320-room (80 club level) and 40-suite property boasts more than 40,000 square feet of meeting rooms, a full-service European-style spa, 50-foot horizon-edge rooftop swimming pool with retractable glass roof, three restaurants (including innovative four star dining at The Charleston Grill), a

host of on-site boutiques as well as close proximity to blocks and blocks of shop-'til-you-drop opportunities on King Street. Guests are welcomed into a grand Italian marble lobby with a Georgian open arm staircase and 12-foot crystal chandelier. Guest rooms, ranging in size from 400 square feet in the Executive Rooms to the 1,200-square-foot Presidential Suite, feature early American design with period reproductions and Italian marble bathrooms.





The Peninsula Grill's Coconut Cake

My culinary odyssey began in grand style just across the street from Charleston Place, at the Peninsula Grill, located in the Planter's Inn. We arrived early, and already a well-heeled crowd had populated the intimate dining room, bar and the lushly landscaped courtyard. Exceptionally personable, Executive Chef Robert Carter, who has been at the helm since 1998, prefaced our meal by saying, "We're gonna have a lot of fun at dinner tonight," and proceeded to present us with a king's feast, Charleston style. An amuse-bouche of pork pâté with peach jam on endive with fried carrot frond packed a tremendous amount of flavor into a single bite. Chef Carter's greatest hits feast continued with jumbo lump crab salad, fried green tomatoes, and oyster stew with smoked bacon, the latter left me tearing off pieces of piping hot loaf bread to sop up every last drop. For the main course, our table shared tastings of jumbo sea scallops, Virginia wild striped bass with blue crab and tender beef filet served with a trio of accompaniments (I was smitten at the mention of truffle butter, although the balsamic reduction with bits of blue cheese was equally delectable).

When dessert was mentioned, we did not know how we would even manage it until our waiter said that not trying Carter's Ultimate Coconut Cake is "like going to Disney World and not seeing Mickey Mouse." Based on his grandmother's recipe, the cake has become one of the city's culinary ambassadors. Since they began taking mail orders in 2003, Carter's staff annually fulfills orders for the 12-pound cakes that cumulatively are the equivalent weight of seven full-size pickup trucks. Each of the towering 12-layers are infused with coconut and fresh vanilla and then topped with a cream and butter icing, coated in toasted coconut and dripping with simple syrup. Divine!

To help orient myself with the city's rich culinary history, I signed up for a tour with Culinary Tours of Charleston, which provides an up close and personal look inside some of the city's most famous restaurants. Our small group was led by a charming gentleman whose name – Houn Calhoun – was perfectly suited to his Southern drawl. We started our early morning jaunt with coffee and pastries under a shady allée near Pineapple Fountain in Waterfront Park. In Charleston, the past

is always present, especially in its cuisine, which represents a true cultural melting pot. Calhoun's condensed version of the city's culinary roots was interspersed with colorful anecdotes. Above all, I learned that you have not had grits until you have eaten them in Charleston. "If you're used to the kind that come in a box, you might as well eat the box. It has more flavor," Calhoun said with a hearty belly laugh.

Our first stop was Carolina's Restaurant, whose main dining room is one of the oldest in Charleston. Chef Jill Mathias, who hails from Fargo, led us through the kitchen, where a cook was busy stirring a huge pot of grits. "This is a gem of a place to be a chef," she said. Mathias talked about workflow and pointed out several pieces of specialty kitchen equipment, including a cast iron flattop for cooking fish. Our group gathered around the bar, where a blackboard displayed a list of 13 local purveyors who supply the restaurant with vegetables and protein. Mathias passed a plate of what was available fresh locally that day, encouraging us to sample what we fancied while she shared interesting anecdotes about the various farms. "I like meat to come from happy animals," she added.

Arguably the grand dame of low country cuisine in Charleston, our next stop was Magnolias, where glasses of "Southern table wine" aka sweet tea, were waiting to take the edge off of our humid stroll. Executive Chef Don Drake simply summed up his kitchen philosophy as "keep it simple, stupid." He elaborated by saying that the secret behind Magnolias 22 year run is that he always insists on starting with the best ingredients, including all organic produce (sourced from 45 different local farms) and meat processed by an on-staff butcher. "I care about what goes into my body and want the same for my patrons," he added.

Questions from the group suddenly stopped when presented with a tasting of shrimp and grits. Chef Drake always uses three parts spring water to one part grits (stone ground) and stirs constantly for the first five minutes. For lunch service, grits are started at 7:30 and are in perfect form by 11:30. As we walked through the kitchen, Drake introduced us to Miss Marshall, who he referred to as the grandmother of the kitchen. "She is a great natural Southern cook who keeps everyone in line." Not looking up from the okra she was chopping, Miss Marshall simply nodded in quiet agreement.



The dining room at Magnolias



The main dining room at Cypress

I would have to say that the visit to Cypress was my favorite among the tour stops. Chef Craig Diehl greeted us at the door wearing a trucker-style baseball cap and a seersucker chef's coat as if we were old friends stopping by to catch up. The contemporary interior of the space is quite striking and punctuated by an open theatre-style kitchen and a two-story glass-walled wine room, the upper reaches of which are accessed via a spiral staircase.

Like his mentor at Magnolia's, Diehl also espouses a similar organic philosophy. "We've bastardized foods. You should be able to taste the natural elements. Cows eat grass so meat should taste grassy," he explained while bouncing around the kitchen like a Labrador puppy. Serving "jazzed up redneck American food" such as patty melts and corn dogs, Chef Diehl also makes charcuterie in-house, a process he learned the old fashioned way: by buying a whole pig and "figuring out how to do as much with it as possible." His trial and error using a cold-curing process has certainly paid off, as the lamb bacon he passed around was melt-in-your-mouth delicious. With meat on the brain, Diehl also offered up his own recommendations for the best barbeque in Charleston: Fiery Ron's Home Team BBQ. "If you frequent the busiest barbeque places, the meat is always fresh," he offered.

Our last stop of the day was a visit to Executive Chef Nate Whiting at Tristan, located in the French Quarter Inn. The most contemporary cuisine of the bunch, Whiting, who came to Tristan via the five star restaurant at Woodland's Inn and spent years apprenticing in Italy, prepares food with scientific precision. During a tour of the kitchen he showed us what he dubbed "the best invention since the gas stove": a thermal emergent circulator, used for sous vide cooking. While watching a piece of meat cook in a sealed bag within a bowl of water is certainly less dramatic than an open flame, Whiting pointed out that "romance is imprecise."

Whiting's kitchen wizardry also uses pressure cookers, dehydrators and torches, the latter of which is used to "kiss"

tomatoes to remove the skin instead of blanching so they still taste like tomatoes in the end. His employment of leading-edge techniques is not just for show, as he truly believes they make the food taste better. "My philosophy is that success is the sum of many small things done correctly," he added. He dared us to try a sampling of mozzarella made a-la-minute for the tomato mozzarella salad with a disclaimer that it would "ruin tastings of all mozzarellas to follow." I have to agree that the memory of the freshly made and still-warm cheese will be hard to beat.

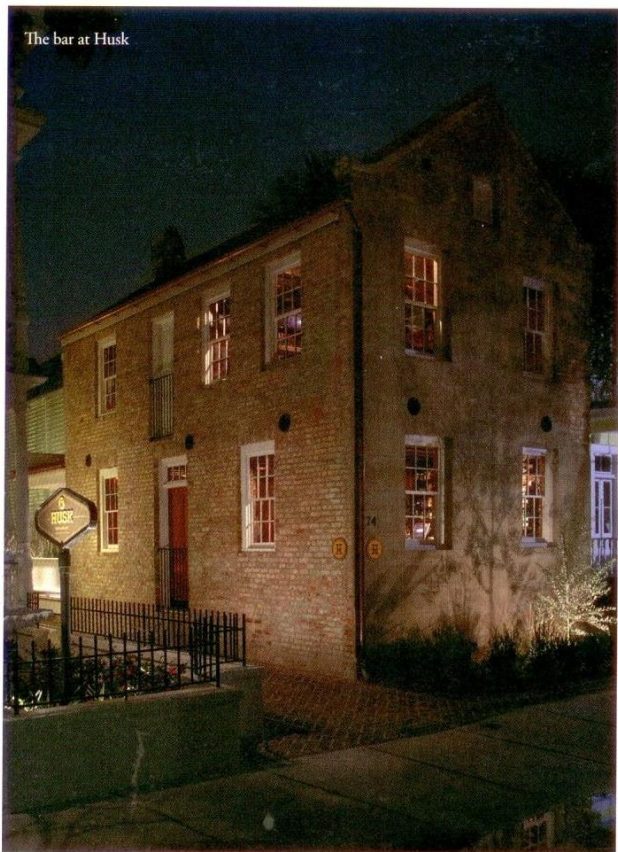
Proof that good food in Charleston comes at all price points, for breakfast the next morning we headed to the Dixie Supply Bakery & Café, a tiny place connected to a convenience store/gas station on a side street a short walk from our hotel. By the time we arrived a little after 8 a.m., the line was already out the door. Their highly touted shrimp and grits were served with bacon and onion on a bed of grits so creamy they could have qualified as dessert! This little gem became our go-to breakfast spot for the duration of our stay.

At my urging, after breakfast we skipped the bicycle rickshaw and walked the 15 minutes to the South Carolina Aquarium, located next to the Ft. Sumpter Memorial. We were there to see the only sea turtle hospital and rehabilitation facility in South Carolina. Located in the basement, tank after tank held turtles in all stages of life (adults can reach up to 400 pounds) that are all cared for by two full-time staff and nearly two-dozen volunteers. Windows on all sides of each tank make it fun for kids to peek in. The staff and volunteers work hard to see that each turtle is released back into their native habitat once they are medically cleared. Photos tacked to the bulletin board from recent releases show that hundreds show up for these community-wide celebrations of local wildlife. The rest of the aquarium is just as interesting and definitely a worthwhile stop when traveling to Charleston with children in tow.



House-made charcuterie at Cypress

The bar at Husk



Cast Iron Roasted Grouper from Husk





Lunch at Husk continued our culinary adventure. Located in a late 19th century two-story home with porch balconies on Queen Street between King and Meeting Streets, Husk has lunch and dinner menus that change daily. The dining room effortlessly sashayed between rustic and glamorous with the shimmer of silver-leafed walls contrasting with honey-colored wood floors and tabletops. As we perused the menu, which is laden with ingredients indigenous to the South, we were presented with warm benne seed rolls in vintage bank coin bags and accompanied by a spread made of half-butter, half-bacon lard and seasoned with local honey. They were so good we had to have our waitress take them away for fear that we would spoil our appetites for the rest of the meal.

We started with fried green tomatoes with mustard ramp dressing. Not wanting to break form, I opted for the shrimp and grits served with smoked peppers, onions and Surry County sausage, while my tablemate chose the Husk cheeseburger. While my entrée certainly did not disappoint (I now believe it must be a crime to serve subpar grits in Charleston!), the burger – a double-stack of locally sourced grass-fed beef patties with ground-in Benton's hickory-smoked bacon and simply dressed with a gooey layer of American cheese on a homemade bun – stole the show. A quick visit to the wood-fired oven lent the patties a unique crispy crust. Our dishes were accompanied by a Benton's bacon cornbread served in a cast iron skillet and a succotash of South Carolina lady peas and sweet corn.

Our days of delightful dining came to an apropos end where we began: The Charleston Grill at Charleston Place. Richly paneled walls define the dining room, with intimate spaces set apart by linen drapery with silk tassels. A wall of windows overlooks a flowering courtyard, while an eclectic collection of art inside celebrates both country and cityscapes.

Having spent a good portion of the day on foot exploring the shops and vendors of the recently renovated City Market, a cool glass of strawberry lemonade (with fresh strawberries as abundant as ice cubes) hit the spot.

Under the expert eye of Executive Chef Michelle Weaver, The Charleston Grill has obtained both the AAA Four Diamond Award and the Mobil Four-Star Award. Passionate about cooking since childhood, the New England Culinary Institute graduate worked in New Orleans and Nashville before joining the staff at The Charleston Grill in 1997 and becoming executive chef in 2009.

The menu is divided into four categories: Pure, Lush, Southern and Cosmopolitan, each section artfully reflecting its moniker. My menu for the evening sampled from all and included a crispy shrimp appetizer from the Cosmopolitan section, prepared with red chile sauce and a sweet soy ginger-kaffir lime hollandaise; from Pure came an arugula avocado Salad with watercress, Vidalias, Easter egg radishes and lime-herb vinaigrette; butter poached Maine lobster with wild mushrooms, fava beans, parsnips, preserved lemon and sweet corn purée was from Lush; and from the Southern selections, pimento cheese grits with apple smoked bacon and crab. I ended the meal where it started: with strawberries, namely a graham cracker pie with roasted strawberry sorbet and rhubarb.

Those planning a culinary-centric visit to Charleston may want to consider scheduling their visit around the Taste of Charleston (October 7-9, 2011). Arts aficionados should check out the Spoleto Festival, internationally recognized as America's premier performing arts festival, held in 2012 from May 25 through June 12. Fashionistas will want to line the runway at Charleston Fashion Week (March 20-24, 2012). **sf**

Sources: Carolina's Restaurant (10 Exchange Street, carolinasrestaurant.com), Charleston Fashion Week (charlestonmag.com/fashionweek/main), Charleston Grill (224 King Street, charlestongrill.com), Charleston Place (205 Meeting St., charlestonplace.com), City Market (188 Meeting St., thecharlestoncitymarket.com), Culinary Tours of Charleston (40 North Market St., culinarytoursofcharleston.com), Cypress Restaurant (167 East Bay Street, magnolias-blossom-cypress.com), Dixie Supply Bakery & Café (62 State Street, dixiecafecharleston.com), Firey Ron's Home Team BBQ (1205 Ashley River Road, hometeambbq.com), Husk Restaurant (76 Queen St., huskrestaurant.com), Magnolias Restaurant (185 East Bay Street, magnolias-blossom-cypress.com), Peninsula Grill (112 North Market St., peninsulagrill.com), South Carolina Aquarium (100 Aquarium Wharf, scaquarium.org), Spoleto Festival (SpoletoUSA.org), Taste of Charleston (charlestonrestaurantassociation.com/taste-of-charleston), Tristan Restaurant (10 Linguard St., tristandining.com)