

EXPLORER

Beer Gets Its Own Neighborhood in Charleston

On tap in the Brewery District: stouts, porters, I.P.A.s, collard pizza and even a skatepark.

By MATT LEE and TED LEE

Charleston is nice — “the jewel of the Lowcountry,” a travel writer recently proclaimed. But can a place so nice become too precious? There’s a point on the third or fourth visit when the perfection and elegance of the “Holy City’s” streetscapes, its meticulously restored and uniformly classical houses, begin to close in on your brain’s right hemisphere.

You may find yourself craving a moment of weirdness, modernism or merengue. And with the real estate stakes so high — the median sale price of a home on the lower peninsula was over \$850,000 in January — whimsy, experimentation and indolence seem to struggle for a foothold. The dazzling restaurant scene is so competitive, dining out on a Friday or Saturday can be as premeditated as a trip to the moon.

Those of us who live here may feel these limitations most acutely. Some recall a time in the last century when things were a less battened-down, almost beachy, the pace slower. True, Charleston may have been even more formal and less sophisticated in many ways then — a Heineken and a platter of fried shrimp was the best you could hope for in the average restaurant — but Charleston fundamentally lived up to its billing as a hub of Southern adventure.

Fortunately, anyone — local or visitor alike — who chafes at Charleston’s stateliness and decorum today can find an instant remedy: its beer, served fresh from the tank in a largely industrial neighborhood two miles north of the city’s tourist center.

Here in “The Neck,” where seven breweries have opened within a short bike ride of each other in the last three years, serendipity is celebrated, dogs and children

are welcome, and you can come as you are. Rust, gravel and the occasional puddle of hydraulic fluid are all part of the scenery, and the soundtrack is guaranteed to be esoteric. The head brewer himself (yes, alas, they are all men currently) is typically just a wolf-whistle away.

We recently set out to survey all seven new breweries, most food options, and a few of the entertainments in Charleston’s Brewery District, and can report that time spent

here is refreshing. A perfect elevation for surveying the area is the observation deck at Sk8 Charleston, a \$4.8 million, three-quarter-acre skatepark the city opened in 2017, offering marsh and Ashley River views to those who aren’t dropping into the park’s two polished-concrete bowls. Employee-selected beats compete with the sound of skateboards *chuck-clack*-ing and the whoosh of Interstate 26 just to the east.

While Matt’s boys let out some excess energy at ground level, we sipped water on the deck and spotted ospreys and ibises working the huge expanse of spartina grass to the west. Alas, adult beverages are prohibited (sodas and snacks are sold, along with all manner of skate gear and apparel, in the store), but a spectator’s wrist band (\$1) entitles you to come and go all day.

As a post-skate reward, Cooper River Brewing, a short walk away, is typical of the new Charleston brewery model, retrofitted into a charmless steel warehouse building, but with enough Adirondack chairs, picnic tables and string lights in the parking lot to say “beer garden.” Indoors, tanks and brewing activity are on full display, separated from the taproom by a wall of windows.

The bar (technically a beer, wine and cider-only “taproom”; a full liquor license requires more paperwork) has a sporty feel, with three TV screens blazing. Matt’s boys petted an old hound dog while we ordered pints from a list that aims to please every taste — a stout, porter, ESB (extra special bitter), India Pale Ale, a golden ale — without flourish or gimmick, except for their (delicious) Watermelon Wheat.

Like most breweries in the area, Cooper River offers a range of options, including the humane, sample-enabling, five-ounce pour for \$2, but this time we claimed full pints of the I.P.A. and the Session Ale, and retreated to the outdoor picnic tables. In the open loading dock of the brewery, facing the beer garden, Pat Nelson stood behind a card table with a banner proclaiming “Big Boned Barbecue,” and we ordered smoky-tender brisket evocative of West Texas (\$11) and sausage (\$5), with mac and cheese, cornbread and the fixings (onion, pickle slices, white bread). Mr. Nelson, who moved here from Minnesota, offered that he could easily make more money setting up outside an office building at lunch time. “But I like the



atmosphere and the pace better here, and there's beer," he said.

The earthy smell of low tide crept into the parking lot, reminding us that The Neck is named for the point where the peninsula narrows to only a mile's width of dry land between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. Inside the marsh-grass limits, the landscape is a burly hodgepodge of uses: The residential Rosemont, Four Mile and Silver Hill neighborhoods float like islands among rug cleaners, stone cutters, a cola bottler, auto repair shops and tattoo parlors, as well as the last vestiges of Charleston's downtown seaport: the International Longshoreman's union hall and marine rigging suppliers.

The salt-swept Magnolia Cemetery (dedicated 1850), its curving paths on the romantic, Frederick Law Olmsted model, is to the east. Cooper River Brewing, which shares a warehouse complex, sits between a pretty cluster of houses, a small cemetery and a highway off-ramp.

The next day, we began our beer crawl with a hearty lunch at Martha Lou's Kitchen, which has fed people for over 30 years from its pink cinder-block building on Morrison Drive, well north of the city center but toward the south end of our focus. To step into the restaurant is to enter a southern grandmother's kitchen, pots in full view, bubbling at the back of the stove. After greetings — hugs all around with sisters Ruth Gadsden and Debra Worthy (the restaurant's namesake, their mother, was home that day) — we placed our orders from the menu, which rotates slightly throughout the week. Ted paired fried, salty pork chops with lima beans and cabbage, studded with neck bone; for Matt, red-pepper-spiked chitlins with yams and collards.

After lunch we stopped on Conroy Street,

MATT LEE AND TED LEE'S latest project is a remastered edition of the 1966 "Graham Kerr Cookbook, by The Galloping Gourmet," coming next month from Rizzoli.

at Revelry Brewing, the southernmost brewery on our trail and one of the oldest (opened 2014). Here was the jolt of architectural eccentricity we craved, an improvised structure that looks like a few shipping containers crash-landed on top of a warehouse.

In the high-ceiling taproom, which shares floor space with the tanks, a broken spinet piano is incorporated into the bar. And a wacky approach prevails on the beer bill, at least where the names are concerned: Funkmaster Brett (a Belgian I.P.A.), Poke the Bear (an American Pale Ale) and Peculiar Paradise (a golden saison) seem to hint at creative risks taken with yeasts and malts, though the extensive liner notes on each offering are beer-wonk reassuring. We

took a swig or two for courage, because a two-story exterior iron staircase beckoned, leading to the rooftop bar. When we finished the climb, we felt like we had crashed a college party, but were rewarded with a scene that felt like an open-air living room, with a propane fireplace roaring, a beer and wine bar with two bartenders (a couple of golden labradors, too) and a sweet view of the city's bridges and steeples. For all the florid naming, the beers seemed restrained on the palate.

Turning back north up Morrison Drive, past Santi's Mexican restaurant — another fixture of this neighborhood and a source for child-friendly enchiladas and quesadillas — we made our way to Munkle Brewing, among the few new-construction breweries on our list. Its windowless exterior says funeral home more than fun house, but inside, a man-cave atmosphere prevailed: small clusters of people playing pool or stroking their dogs behind the ears. Strangely, tanks are hidden from view.

Another quirk: beer is dispensed into 14-ounce thistle-shaped glasses, a nod to the brewery's inspiration, Belgium. Our bartender pulled a Gully Washer Wit and a Pout House Pale Ale (\$5 each) from the white porcelain tower and we settled into rocking chairs on the outdoor porch, with a view of the train tracks and the sunset. A mobile, wood-fired pizza oven, Amanda Click's First Name Basis, was parked nearby, and we split a thin, appealingly crisp "Collard Pie" (topped with Cheddar, red onion, mustard oil, and pancetta, \$17).

Our glasses were half empty when a man in a ball cap and fleece vest introduced himself — he was Palmer Quimby, the owner. He'd worked in the bar business in Charleston for years, but eventually followed his dream into beer-making, opening Munkle (long story, but his uncle was once a monk) in late 2017. We asked him why Charleston was in the throes of a brewing renaissance.

Two major legislative changes, he explained. A bill passed in 2014 permitted beer to be sold alongside food and in virtually any format: kegs, cans, bottles, pint glasses. Seven years before that, it was the "Pop the Cap" law, which was championed by the Coast Brewing Co. co-owner Jaime Tenney, and fundamentally changed the business model for beer here. Before 2007, brewers had to keep alcohol levels at or below 6.3 percent (duh?!) and no one could imbibe on the premises. "Everyone who has a beer bar, taproom or brewery in the entire state of South Carolina has Jaime to thank," he said. (Coast Brewing and Holy City Brewing are first-wave microbreweries located in North Charleston, just north of the Brewery District; Palmetto Brewing Co.,

the first in the region, is the southernmost site in the district.)

Less than 100 yards back down Meeting Street was Fatty's Beer Works, which backs up to a cemetery. Fatty's is pretty much any uncle's dream: a two-door garage with an L-shaped bar, a drum kit and a bunch of tanks, next door to a tattoo parlor (Blu Gorilla). The five-ounce beers are \$2.50, but the \$10 flight of four makes a lot of sense, allowing you to survey almost everything on offer — a French saison, a porter, an I.P.A. and an ESB, all crisp and quaffable but with surprisingly subtle differences between the styles (well, the porter we could pick out of a lineup). Were our powers of discernment suffering from overexposure? We closed out and headed home.

The next afternoon, we headed up the King Street Extension, just north of the skate park, to Tradesman Brewing, the place with the broadest gravel parking lot and the homeliest affect: an unmarked steel big-box with a refrigerated trailer and four porta-potties parked outside. We spied a rusty fridge with tap handles fitted to it through the open roll-gate of the warehouse. At a card-table, a trio of 20-some-things were deep in a game of Clue.

We soon learned: Do not judge a brewery by its appearance; the beers poured here — a double I.P.A. and a Boatwright (American pale), among others — were riveting, with the heft and tropical curves we expected from a Charleston-made beer. Tradesman, it turns out, has been in the business since 2014, but moved to The Neck recently from James Island, a southern suburb.

Not all breweries we visited felt jury-rigged: Edmund's Oast, the most ambitious brewery in the area, opened in September 2017 on a xeriscaped courtyard in a gleaming new office development that includes The Workshop, billed as Charleston's first food hall (a pork belly banh mi from Pink Bellies, and the thali assortment at Sambar, are the choice options there.) Edmund's, which is gearing up to ship its beers nationwide, has almost a half acre of production space, including a barrel-aging room exclusively for its sour, wild-fermented beers that is larger than most apartments in town.

The brewery's full restaurant kitchen plays down as "pub fare" the excellent work they do, leaning heavily on their wood oven to bake veggie-forward flatbreads, fish, chicken wings and even gyros. With 20 taps, the beers run the full spectrum from sour to

serious, and Edmund's is hosting the first attempt at a collaboration among the different brewers in the district.

The next Thursday we passed through the lunch line at Bertha's Kitchen, at the far northern end of The Neck, for meltingly tender platters of stewed oxtails and turkey wings served over rice, before heading to Lo-Fi Brewing nearby. We saved Lo-Fi for last. Embedded in a long-term construction zone for a new highway interchange, it shares its lot with a muddy tow pound. A vinyl sign the size of a cafeteria tray, flapping against a chain-link fence and a pallet of beer cans in the loading bay were the only indication we were in the right place.

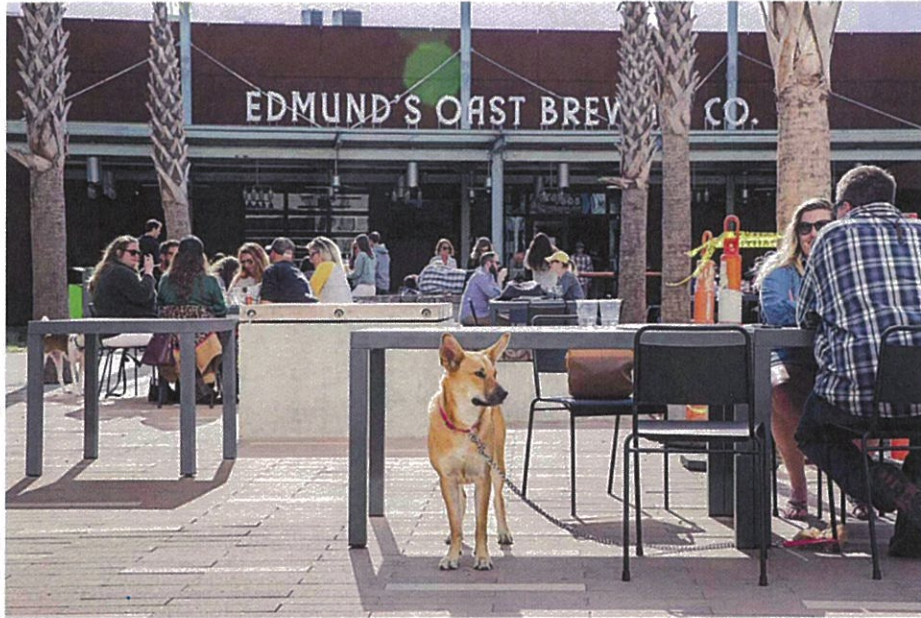
When we walked into the open-sided hangar just before happy hour, Frank Zappa's "Andy" was blasting on large performance speakers, and Jason Caughman, the owner, puttered around looking for his phone. A rack of wooden barrels and a drum kit separated the tanks and equipment from an area of cement floor furnished with two long picnic tables. "Sorry, we just finished canning today," he shouted, explaining the volume level. A woman in sparkly eye shadow was changing out tap handles behind the smallest beer bar we'd ever seen.

Over the next hour, we'd nurse a totally O.K. Mexican lager and a fruity New England I.P.A. called Jacuzzi, and watch as a party engulfed us. Two sacks of oysters materialized, then some people with dogs, then more dogs and people, and Mr. Caughman took the wheel of the forklift to move pallets of kegs around. Once the steamed oysters hit the table, we recharged our glasses, grabbed oyster knives and joined in.

Eventually Mr. Caughman, whose shoulder-length hair and gray-speckled beard suggests Jeff Bridges's "The Dude," gave up his labors and approached the shucking table. We asked Mr. Caughman about his graphic design philosophy — the electric pinks and yellows, as well as the unicorns printed on his cans and kegs, that feel like a brazen retort to the muted greens and browns, the palmettos and Spanish moss of the classic Lowcountry landscape.

"Breweries are inherently laid back," he said, taking a swig. "What do you feel when you see a unicorn? It's playful. That's what Lo-Fi is shouting: relax and have fun."

Checking out seven new breweries within a short bike ride of one another.



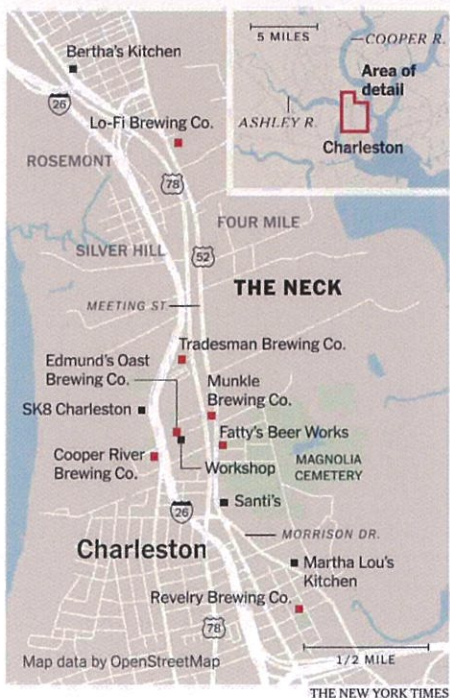
HUNTER McRAE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The patio at Edmund's Oast Brewing Co. in Charleston, S.C. It opened in September and is considered the most ambitious brewery in the region.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY HUNTER McRAE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES





From top: Lily Sanford, left, a bartender at Revelry Brewing; beer flights at Tradesman Brewing; the city's Magnolia Cemetery; Joshua Moore, left, and William Mayer at Sk8, a \$4.8 million, three-quarter-acre skatepark the city opened in 2017.