SPECIALTY OF THE HOUSE

Charleston’s soul food cafés serve some of the South’s most inspired cooking

BY JANE AND MICHAEL STERN  PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD COLEMAN

No four-star restaurant offers bespoke cuisine to compare to lunch in the soul food cafés of Charleston, South Carolina. You’ll spend no more than $10; plates and flatware will likely be disposable; and you’ll drink sweet tea or lemonade instead of wine or beer, because alcohol, like loitering and swearing, is inappropriate in these places. Their humble locations may be far from the city’s famously beautiful waterfront, but the meals you’ll eat here are cooked by masters and are some of the South’s most delicious.

From the street, with its dilapidated office chairs for outdoor furniture and colorful murals on its facade, Martha Lou’s Kitchen is the last place you’d expect to find white tablecloth dining. But sure enough, we enter one afternoon, and Martha Lou Gadsden’s daughter Debra leads us to a table covered by crisp, white linen. Altogether there are five tables in the restaurant, six if you include the one in back, where Debra sits and reads her Bible during leisure hours, seven if you also include the one nearest the kitchen, where Martha Lou and Debra position themselves so that Debra can rise to greet a new customer and Martha Lou can easily turn to the nearby stove. The tiny place is crowded with pictures of family and friends, a few encomia from the press, and a TV in the corner, tuned to a Christian network whose missionary message can barely be heard above the din of an conditioner that’s propped up on a windowsill with a pepper shaker.

The menu is limited: fried chicken every day, plus a rotating repertoire of dishes that includes fried whiting, pork chops smothered in gravy, barbecued ribs, and stewed chitterlings, along with such sides as tomato-charged red rice and plain white rice, cabbage and collards, lima beans, okra soup, and corn bread. When we place an order for chicken and fish, Debra pauses a moment, looks us over, and says, “It’s going to be a few minutes. We have to cook your meat. It’s raw now.” She waits for us to acknowledge that this is not fast food. It’s nothing like it whatsoever.

We’ve been eating at Martha Lou’s, and the city’s other soul food cafés, for decades now, and we’ve come to realize that they’re fundamental to the city’s culinary identity. Their menus are rooted in the Gullah tradition—Gullah being the name given to slaves from West Africa who worked in the area’s rice plantations and later settled in Charleston and the surrounding Lowcountry region. The Gullahs developed a magnificent make-shift cuisine of one-pot meals, transcendent

Debra Gadsden holding a tray of fried chicken with cabbage and collards at Martha Lou’s Kitchen, in Charleston

Jane and Michael Stern are contributing editors to Saveur and the authors of Roadfood.com.
Bertha's okra soup; facing page: a customer eating stewed rutabagas at Dave's Seafood Carry-Out (see page 89 for recipes)
seasonings, precision deep-frying, and countless iterations of okra soup (a relative of Creole gumbo, but with rice on the side instead of in the bowl) and perloo (sometimes called pilau or pirolo in Charleston), a slow-cooked, deeply flavored rice and meat stew. These traditions form the backbone of all Lowcountry cooking, even its fanciest incarnations; but it's in these cafes that you'll find the original essensials, including such low-on-the-hog delicacies as ham hocks, pigs' feet, tails, neck bones, and more.

We've always considered Charleston one of the country's most alluring eating destinations, with an astonishing variety of experiences, from moonlight oyster roasts to candlelight antebellum banquets. But on our most recent trip, the soul food cafes were our focus. We wanted to get into the kitchens, talk to the cooks and the customers, and savor this vital component of Southern food.

When our chicken and fish finally arrive, we determine that if Martha Lou's cooking has a signature, it's that everything is spiced, sugared, or otherwise seasoned to the max. Iced tea is shockingly sweet and shockingly lemony. Macaroni and cheese is less about palliation than excitement: the silky orange emulsion in which the noodles bask is flavored with hot peppers. The crust on the chicken and fish is salty, big-flavored, and a mighty chew. Bread pudding, a staple in local soul food restaurants and always listed among side dishes, is dense and sweet enough to pass as dessert.

A few miles north of here, the bare-table, plastic vine-festooned lunchroom called Ernie's hasn't had its name on a sign outside for years, but the waitress, Bessie Alexander, tells us they're hoping to put one up very soon. Few customers bother with a menu. Step up to the counter, and Alexander will recite what's available, delivering the list like a sea island melody rather than a waiter's obligatory recitation. One of the items of which she sings is their take on okra soup. No adjectives and no descriptions are offered, but regular customers know that it's a heaping pile of food that rises a couple of inches above the rim of the bowl—not just okra, but also significant pork bones from which great clouds of brick red meat detach when you probe with a fork or spoon. Ernie's offers it as a bowl and as

dinner, for $7 and $8, respectively—both of which are awesome meals.

Another simple-sounding local dish that is anything but minimal is lima beans. At Ernie's, the lima bean dinner is a gigantic meal that is delivered to the table on a battery of dishes: a plate for the rice, plus two bowls—one for beans, the other for a heap of neck bones. The limas are khaki-color sachets that have absorbed massive amounts of piggy flavor as they cooked. With the neck bones, or in place of them, you also can choose pigs' tails, which are little more than cylinders of glistening, warm pork fat that melt as they hit your tongue.

**LIMA BEANS, WHICH MAY BE FRESH DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS OR FROZEN, ARE HONORED IN SOUTHERN COOKING.**

Chef Philip Bardin, of the Old Post Office restaurant on Edisto Island, southwest of Charleston, rhapsodized to us once that eating lima beans at their best—plump and topped with ham hock flavor from the cookpot—is "like eating steak." But as important as they are throughout the South, it is only in Charleston that they become supper's centerpiece.

At Bertha's Kitchen, which is located in North Charleston, a mostly industrial neighborhood, the Tuesday special of field peas and ham hock is served in the same deconstructed fashion as the lima bean supper. "The hocks and peas go together," says Julia Grant, the youngest of the late Albetha Grant's three daughters, who now run the place. "But I divide them—hock on the plate, peas in the bowl—you can get to the meat more easily. That's the way our mother taught us."

Albertha Grant is a beloved figure in North Charleston. When she passed on, in 2007, the mayor spoke at her funeral. The South Carolina legislature issued a formal declaration of sympathy, praising her "Southern hospitality for over 25 years." Encouraged by oldest son Bobby, she started her restaurant, then renamed, in 1979, in two rooms of a nearby motel—one for the kitchen, the other with a seating capacity of eight. Most of her business was takeout. Much still is. Bertha, who learned to cook from her mother, had already been known for her kitchen wizardry. Bobby recalls, "If she had a beautician's appointment on Saturday, the beautician would call Thursday or Friday and ask her to bring a plate of lunch."

Julia and her two older sisters, Linda and Sharon, fondly recall family dinners attended by neighbors' children, friends, and even strangers who were down on their luck. "She was everybody's mom," Julia remembers. "All the recipes we use are hers. Even when she retired, she made sure we did them right. No shortcuts! She would sit in her chair in the kitchen and watch over us." They still use Bertha's aluminum pots and pans. "We've got one for beans, one for cabbage, one for cooking greens. We would never switch them. And we've got cast iron for the smothered pork chops and chicken. The more you use it, the better it gets."

None of the recipes are written down, and the girls aren't eager to share them. We wonder out loud, "Did we taste fruit cocktail in the bread pudding?" Julia breaks out into a Cheshire cat grin and doesn't say a word. What makes the macaroni and cheese so rich and creamy? "It's the cheesiest!" is all she'll say, noting that many customers ask not for the tender center but for the chewy parts scraped from the top and edges of the caserole. Whatever the specifics, there's a refined balance to the taste of everything cooked in Bertha's kitchen; nothing is overly seasoned.

Above: Martha Lou's corn bread; facing page: Bertha's baked chicken with peppers (see page 88 for recipes)
Strawberry cake at Bertha's Kitchen (see page 89 for recipe)
Turkey prioleau, for instance, is a coastal comfort-food paradigm of earthy white rice laced with little shreds of white and dark meat, moist with turkey drippings and dotted with just enough pepper to boldface the flavor. For all their endless succulence, the fried pork chops and chicken are elegant enough that they would seem as right on Spode as they are on Styrofoam.

While the seasoning is deft and the cooking refined, it must be said that the very nature of several of Bertha’s specialties is extremely luscious, or, put another way, extremely fatty. In particular, we’re thinking of barbecued pigs’ feet, or, as everybody here calls them, pig feet. Like hocks, they’re cooked all morning until fall-apart tender, then dressed with good barbecue sauce before serving. For eaters accustomed to lean pork, the composition will be shocking: a few wisps of pink meat encased in amber fat that’s best described as flavor on the bone.

Although much of Bertha’s food is portioned out at the steam table—field peas, collards, pork and beans—some of the best main courses are cooked to order. Periodically, Sharon calls out from behind the counter, “Who’s having fish?” Those who are getting close to the head of the line announce their intentions. Cooks get the fish in the fryer so it’s ready when the customers step up to name their side dishes. When we order fried pork chops, which also require time, Julia uses a ballpoint pen to write the price of the meal on the bottom of a disposable plate and slides it over to the cashier, Brittany (her niece), so she can ring it up and we can pay. Once that happens, Julia takes the empty plate and puts it right side up on a kitchen counter where the pork chops will be arriving, hot from the fryer. She tells us to find a seat; she’ll bring the chops to our table when they’re ready. Inefficient? You bet. Soul-satisfying? Incomparably so.

If you think of fried food as cloddish, you need to eat seafood in the Lowcountry. Because the freshest oysters, shrimp, and flounder have always been so readily available, local cooks have evolved a style of cooking that’s as exquisite as tempura, the point being to halo flavor rather than to smother it. Sheathed in a shimmeringly crisp, translucent crust, the shrimp at Dave’s Seafood Carry-Out is as good as it gets.

“Have a little patience. Good things come to he who waits,” says Terry McCray, whose father started the legendary Dave’s years ago. Waiting is a fundamental part of the Dave’s experience, which allows customers to mix and mingle. Formerly located in a building that was famously disheveled, the new place is tidy and very tiny, a two-table street-corner eatery specializing in the fine art of deep-frying. Every meal comes in a takeaway clamshell container. Terry is the one and only staff member on duty, and on a busy evening, he’ll have a few dozen orders going at a time. As he cooks, he takes more orders at the counter, as well as by phone, never writing anything down. Each piece of fish, each shrimp, is first dipped in a wash of eggs, milk, and water, then dredged in flour seasoned with garlic salt, pepper, and other spices known only to the McCrays.

Dave’s everyday shrimp are what put this modest place on the map of Charleston’s edible essentials: firm, pink crescents seasoned just enough to tease out all their ocean sweetness and delicately fried. The pork chop sandwich, served bone-in, sports a more significant crust, as do Tuesday’s giant turkey wings. On Thursday, you can side your meal with hoppin’ John, a Lowcountry staple of black-eyed peas and rice, made here with tender field peas instead.

Dave’s opens late in the afternoon, but any devotee can tell you that the best time to come here is at three or four in the morning, when the joint is jumping with a cast of characters who arrive on bicycle and in stretch limos, wearing cutoffs and formal gowns. Terry is currently having big problems with the city of Charleston over that tradition, because authorities have determined that since he’s in a neighborhood zoned for residential as well as commercial use, he must close at 11 P.M. In the old days, Terry tells us, that’s not much later than when Dave opened in the first place.

The outcome has yet to be determined. “Friends of Dave’s call after I’m supposed to close,” Terry says. “I’m not going to send them away hungry, that’s for sure.”

---

**The Guide Charleston, South Carolina**

Dinner for two with drinks and tip: **Inexpensive**: Under $20  **Moderate**: $20–$80  **Expensive**: Over $80

---

**WHERE TO STAY**

**Charleston Place** 205 Meeting Street (888/635-2350; charlestonplace.com), $215 double. With three excellent restaurants and a spa, this polished, 440-room luxury hotel in the city’s historic district is a sumptuous place to stay.

**Mills House Hotel** 115 Meeting Street (843/577-2400; millshouse.com), $149 double. An elegant, recently restored mid-nineteenth-century hotel in the heart of old Charleston.

**King Charles Inn** 237 Meeting Street (866/546-4700; kingcharlesinn.com), $89 double. This conveniently located hotel has beautifully appointed rooms with period reproductions.

---

**WHERE TO EAT**

**Bertha’s Kitchen** 2332 Meeting Street (843/554-6519). **Inexpensive**. Lowcountry soul food at its best: red rice with sausage; fried chicken with a crackling, peppery red-gold crust; luscious pork chops; macaroni and cheese with crisp-chewy bits from the casserole pan. Don’t miss the turkey prioleau (white rice cooked with drippings and chopped white and dark meat).

**Dave’s Seafood Carry-Out** 42 Morris Street (843/577-7943). **Inexpensive**. This temple of fried food showcases Charleston’s marine bounty: fresh scallops, shrimp, and flounder dipped in flour and fried to perfection. Round out your meal with sides like hoppin’ John, a Lowcountry staple of rice with black-eyed peas.

**Ernie’s 64 Spring Street** (843/723-8591). **Inexpensive**. There’s no “Ernie’s” sign—look for the “No Loitering” notice on the building. There’s no menu, and the bill of fare changes daily, but standbys include the flavorful okra soup, the hearty and meaty lima bean dinner, red rice with pork chops, and an out-of-this-world bread pudding.

**Martha Lou’s Kitchen** 1068 Morrison Drive (843/577-9583). Inexpensive. A tiny eatery with big flavors: exuberantly spiced dishes like pepper mac ‘n’ cheese, lima beans with chunks of ham, a thick and vibrant okra soup. The fried chicken with a salty, chewy crust, cooked to order and served piping hot, is some of the best in town.
**Baked Chicken With Peppers**  
*Serves 8*

Slow-braised chicken with peppers and onions is a soul food staple. This version (pictured on page 83), from Bertha’s Kitchen, is seasoned with plenty of paprika.

8 whole chicken legs  
Kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper, and paprika, to taste  
¼ cup canola oil  
4 cloves garlic, roughly chopped  
2 large green bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and cut into ½”-thick strips  
2 large yellow onions, halved lengthwise and cut crosswise into ½”-thick slices  
¼ cup tomato paste  
1 cup chicken stock

Heat oven to 400°. Season chicken liberally with salt, pepper, and paprika. Heat oil in an 8-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Working in batches, add chicken, skin side down, and cook until skin is golden brown, about 6 minutes. Transfer chicken to a large roasting pan, skin side up, and set aside. Return pan to heat and add garlic, peppers, and onions; cook, stirring, until vegetables begin to soften, about 8 minutes. Stir in tomato paste, cook for 1 minute, and then add chicken stock; scrape browned bits off bottom of pan and mix. Pour vegetables and stock around chicken, and bake until chicken is browned and cooked through, about 1 hour.

**Cabbage and Collards**  
*Serves 8–10*

At Martha Lou’s Kitchen, earthy collard greens and sweet cabbage (pictured on page 78) are steamed together for this unique spin on the Southern side of greens.

2 tbsp. canola oil  
6 oz. slab bacon, cut into 1” slices  
1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped  
1 cup chicken stock  
1 lb. collard greens, stalks removed and roughly chopped  
1 large head cabbage (about 2 ½ lbs.), cored and roughly chopped  
Kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
Crushed red chile flakes, to taste

Heat oil in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium heat and add bacon; cook, stirring, until fat renders, about 6 minutes. Add onion and cook, stirring, until soft, about 5 minutes. Add chicken stock, then collards and cabbage; season with salt, pepper, and chile flakes. Cook, covered and stirring, until collards and cabbage are tender, about 25 minutes. Remove lid and continue cooking until liquid is reduced in volume, about 5 minutes.

**Fried Chicken**  
*Serves 8*

Simply seasoned and fried, with a thin, crisp coating and tender, juicy meat, the fried chicken at Martha Lou’s Kitchen (pictured on page 78) is some of the best we’ve ever tasted.

Heat oven to 425°. Grease and flour an 8” x 8” square baking pan; set aside. Whisk together flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, and salt in a large bowl. Add butter, buttermilk, and egg, and whisk until smooth. Pour into prepared pan and smooth top; bake until golden brown and a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean, about 25 minutes.

**Macaroni and Cheese**  
*Serves 10–12*

This classic side dish from Bertha’s Kitchen is made with white cheddar and topped with orange cheddar for a crunchy, golden brown crust.

Kosher salt, plus more to taste  
1 lb. elbow macaroni  
4 tbsp. unsalted butter  
¼ cup flour  
3 cups milk  
1½ lb. (6 cups) grated sharp white cheddar  
Freshly ground black pepper and cayenne, to taste  
8 oz. (2 cups) grated sharp regular cheddar

Heat oven to 375°. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and add pasta; cook, stirring, until cooked halfway through, about 3 minutes. Drain pasta and set aside. Heat butter in a 2-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Whisk in flour and cook until smooth, about 1 minute. Add milk and cook, whisking, until sauce is thickened and coats the back of a spoon, about 10 minutes. Add white cheddar and stir until melted and smooth; season with salt, pepper, and cayenne. Stir in pasta and transfer to a 9” x 13” baking dish; cover top evenly with regular cheddar and bake until bubbly and top is golden brown, about 35 minutes. Let cool for 10 minutes before serving.

**Cornbread**  
*Serves 8–10*

In some parts of the South, cooks prefer corn bread that’s slightly sweet (pictured on page 82), to counterbalance the salty, smoky flavors of vegetables stewed with pork.

**Hoppin’ John**  
*(Black-Eyed Peas and Rice)*  
*Serves 8–10*

Sandra McCray, the owner of Dave’s Seafood Carry-Out, riffs on this classic dish of rice and peas by adding cumin, coriander, and other spices. She uses field peas, but black-eyed peas are a more traditional choice.

2 strips thick-cut bacon, cut into ½” pieces  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1 rib celery, finely chopped  
½ large yellow onion, finely chopped  
½ large green bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and finely chopped  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
1 cup long-grain white rice, rinsed  
1 tsp. dried thyme  
1 tsp. ground cumin  
1 tsp. ground coriander  
2 whole cloves  
1 stick cinnamon  
1 bay leaf  
2½ cups chicken stock  
1 15-oz. can black-eyed peas, rinsed  
Freshly grated nutmeg, to taste

Heat oven to 350°. Heat bacon in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat; cook, stirring, until fat renders, about 4 minutes. Add garlic, celery, onion, and pepper, salt, and pepper, and cook, stirring, until soft, about 4 minutes. Add rice, thyme, cumin, coriander, cloves, cinnamon, and bay leaf, and cook until rice is lightly toasted, about 3 minutes. Add stock and bring to a boil. Cover pan with lid and place in oven; bake until liquid is absorbed and rice is cooked through, about 20 minutes. Stir in black-eyed peas and nutmeg and let sit, covered, for 10 minutes.
Okra Soup
Serves 6-8
Okra is often boiled or fried and served as a simple side in soul food restaurants, but in Charleston it often comes as a luscious vegetable soup with tomatoes, onion, and celery (pictured on page 80).

- 2 tbsp. canola oil
- 3 strips bacon, finely chopped
- ½ tsp. dried thyme
- 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
- 1 rib celery, finely chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 tbsp. tomato paste
- 1 lb. okra, trimmed and cut into 1” slices
- 6 cups chicken stock
- 1 28-oz. can whole, peeled tomatoes, crushed by hand

Heat oil and bacon in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat; cook, stirring, until fat renders, about 5 minutes. Add thyme, garlic, onion, celery, and bay leaf; season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring, until soft, about 5 minutes. Stir in tomato paste; cook, stirring, until caramelized, about 2 minutes. Add okra, chicken stock, and tomatoes; bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook, until okra is very tender and soup thickens slightly, about 45 minutes.

Stewed Green Beans
Serves 8-10
Infused with the meaty flavor of a smoked turkey leg, these super-tender green beans (pictured on facing page) are a favorite side dish at Martha Lou’s Kitchen.

- 4 tbsp. unsalted butter or bacon fat
- 1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped
- 1 lb. green beans, strings removed
- 1 small smoked turkey leg
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Heat butter in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook, stirring, until soft, about 4 minutes. Add green beans, turkey leg, and 4 cups water. Season with salt and pepper, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, stirring, until green beans are very tender, about 1 hour.

Stewed Rutabagas
Serves 8-10
Sandra McCray at Dave’s Seafood Carry-Out serves an inventive take on rutabagas (pictured on page 81) by stewing them with pork neck bones and ginger, then caramelizing them with sugar to deepen the flavor.

- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1 tsp. dried thyme
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 ribs celery, finely chopped
- 1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
- 1 1” piece ginger, peeled and finely grated
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3 lb. rutabagas, peeled, cut into ¾” cubes
- 8 oz. smoked pork neck bones
- 4 tsp. sugar
- 1½ cups chicken stock

1 Heat oil in a 12” skillet over medium-high heat. Add thyme, garlic, celery, onion, ginger, salt and pepper, and cook, stirring, until soft, about 4 minutes. SET aromatics aside.

2 Heat oven to 400°. Place rutabagas and pork bones in a 9” x 13” baking dish and sprinkle with 2 tsp. sugar; add aromatics and stock. Cover with aluminum foil; bake until rutabagas are tender, about 1 hour. Uncover, and remove pork bones; cut meat away from bones, roughly chop, and return to rutabagas. Sprinkle rutabagas with remaining sugar, stir to combine, and continue baking until caramelized, about 5 minutes.

Strawberry Cake
Serves 12
Strawberry cake, topped with strawberry cream cheese frosting, is a favorite soul food dessert; this delicious version (pictured on page 84) comes from Bertha’s Kitchen.

- 16 tbsp. unsalted butter, softened, plus more for greasing pans
- 3 cups flour, plus more for pans
- 1 tbsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 cup milk
- ½ cup seedless strawberry jam
- 3 tbsp. red food coloring (optional)
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup canola oil
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 3 eggs
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1 1-lb. box confectioners’ sugar, sifted
- 1 tsp. strawberry extract

1 Heat oven to 350°. Grease and flour two 9” round cake pans; set aside. Whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt in a medium bowl; set aside. Whisk together milk, jam, and 2 tbsp. food coloring in a small bowl; set aside. Beat together sugar, oil, vanilla, and eggs in a mixer on medium-high speed until pale and smooth. 2-3 minutes. In 3 additions, alternately add dry and wet ingredients to sugar mixture, beginning and ending with dry; mix until combined. Divide batter between prepared pans and smooth tops; bake until a toothpick inserted in the middle of cakes comes out clean, about 40 minutes. Let cool 15 minutes, unmold, then cool completely.

2 In a large bowl, beat butter and cream cheese on high speed of a mixer until smooth and fluffy, 1-2 minutes. Add remaining food coloring, confectioners’ sugar, and strawberry extract; beat until smooth. Place one cake upside down on a cake stand, and spread ½ frosting over top. Cover with second cake, top side up; frost top and sides of cakes with remaining frosting; refrigerate for 1 hour before serving. Serve at room temperature.