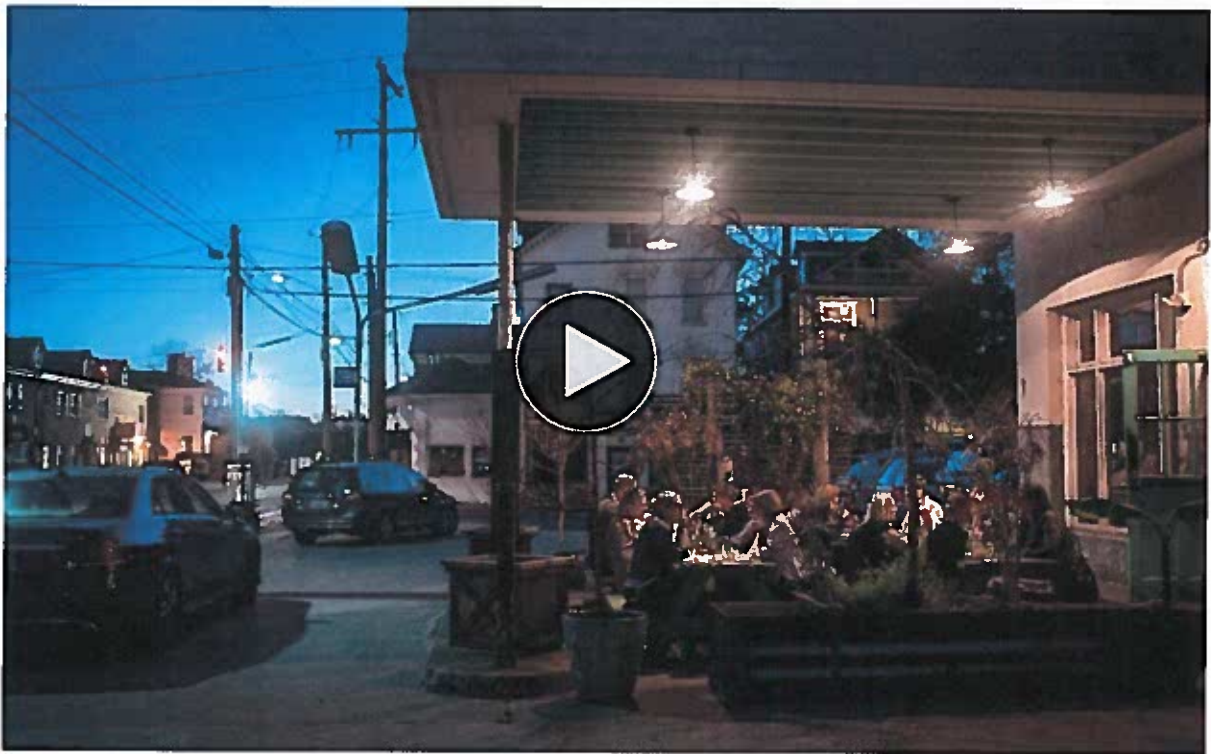


The search for America's best food cities: Charleston, S.C.



First in a monthly series.

You'd best be hungry when dining with Matt Lee, co-author with his brother, Ted, of "The Lee Bros. Charleston Kitchen" and other valentines to the South. In his company, you're tempted to order everything on a menu.

Moments after the whiskey list has been dropped off, the rolls freckled with benne seeds have been delivered and an appetizer of smoky chicken wings has landed on the table at Husk, we decide to loosen our belts and surrender to the South.

No way should a customer miss a skillet of warm corn bread veined with Allan Benton's bacon. The experience at Husk, the hit restaurant from acclaimed chef Sean Brock, would also be incomplete without the nubby catfish splayed over butter beans that make our table look like a church social. Pig ears in a frill of lettuce with marinated cucumbers and red onion taste like a banh mi without a bun. Shrimp and grits gussied up with

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Above: Diners outside Xiao Bao Biscuit, a hipster hangout serving Asian fusion in an old gas station.

Click to play: How shrimp and grits explains Charleston's dining scene.

tomato broth, thick slices of andouille and roasted fennel prompt Lee to elaborate on what makes his home town a top food destination, which is why we're breaking bread on an atypically gray day in one of the country's most charming places.

From Husk, set in the peninsular city's historic district, "we're five minutes away from getting our own fish," says Lee, nodding in the direction of the clean harbor. "And we're 10 minutes away from a farm."

Eating well is almost a birthright here in the low country, where I recently spent several days eating, drinking and shopping to gauge where this city of about 125,000 residents fits on the country's food scale. Charleston is my first stop on a tour of American cities that I believe are the best places to eat right now, an assessment defined by many factors: creativity, variety, tradition, access to prime ingredients and more. My odyssey will take me to at least a dozen places over the next nine months, after which I'll digest my experiences and rank the cities.

My aim is to seek out their best efforts, based on suggestions from insiders and savvy locals as well as from personal experience. It doesn't take a microscope to see that part of what makes Charleston so attractive is a sense of preservation that embraces a mayor, Joseph P. Riley Jr., who has watched out for the city for four decades. (Look, Ma! No sprawl!) While I won't go out of my way to look for faults, I won't be ignoring them, either. Indeed, I expect deficiencies and cracks along the way to inform my eventual Top 10 list.



Where Tom went

RESTAURANT	Artisan Meat Share	+
BAR	The Bar at Husk	+
BAR	The Belmont	+
RESTAURANT	Bertha's Kitchen	+
MARKET	Charleston City Market	+
STORE	Charleston Cooks	+

'A crazy food scene'

Charleston as a serious restaurant destination is a fairly recent phenomenon. Homes were long where some of the best food was enjoyed, a legacy of professional culinarians having taught

slaves to cook for the great townhouses in the 19th century, says professor David Shields of the University of South Carolina. "Even if times were bad and money was short, a good meal was never more than a small boat, a cast net, and fishing line away," writes Douglas W. Bostick in "The Grand Traditions of Charleston Cuisine."

Exhibit A: "Charleston Receipts," first published 65 years ago and the oldest Junior League cookbook still in print. If there's a cookbook more influential — and more connected to a city — I have yet to read it. The collection of 750 recipes, some dating to Charleston's settlement, is the Carolina equivalent of "Joy of Cooking," and it's as easy to find as grits at such popular retail destinations as the Charleston City Market and Charleston Cooks, a well-stocked cookware shop. Instructions for the classics — benne (sesame) wafers, she-crab soup, Huguenot torte — share space with recipes that reflect a local taste for oysters, rice, game and the realities of a city that has endured its share of post-war hardships. (Page 149 tells you how to broil squirrel. No need to parboil, apparently.)

A modern milestone in the city's evolution into a dining haven was its first Food and Wine Festival in 2006, attracting important chefs and food voices from around the country who spread the word that Charleston might be giving New Orleans a run for its money in the South. The festival's first year, 5,000 attendees showed up for a two-day program; last month, BB&T Charleston Wine + Food drew nearly 24,000 participants for a party spread over five days.

Today, the arrival of a Charleston-steeped chef in another market makes headlines. With the introduction of a Husk spinoff in Nashville two years ago, Music City shot to the top of chowhounds' wish lists. (Brock spends time in both establishments.) Washington is waiting, impatiently, for the arrival this summer of the Dabney, a farm-to-table creation from Jeremiah Langhorne, an alumnus of the venerable McCrady's here (as is Aaron Silverman of the wildly popular no-reservations restaurant Rose's Luxury on Capitol Hill). No one's worried about a brain drain in Charleston, though, not when outside talent also wants in: Come fall, John Lewis, the acclaimed pit master of La Barbecue in Austin, expects to be smoking beef in pork country, at Lewis Barbecue. "Charleston is where Austin was 10 years ago," says Lewis, who plans to relocate. "It's a crazy food scene, but it lacks barbecue, and that's what I do."

Brock calls now "the restoration era" and "an important part of the timeline" for Charleston, thanks to the rediscovery of plant varieties and animal breeds that fell out of favor after the Great

How Charleston stacks up

Creativity

Low-country cooking dominates this tourist destination. But a fresh crop of forward-looking restaurants — Edmund's Oast, Two Boroughs Larder, Xiao Bao Biscuit — is re-energizing neighborhood scenes.

Community

It's home base for a range of tastemakers: top chefs Sean Brock, Mike Lata, Frank Lee and Robert Stehling; the popular Garden & Gun magazine; cookbook authors Nathalie Dupree and brothers Matt and Ted Lee; the annual Charleston Wine + Food Festival.

Tradition

Charleston reveres its past and preserves its foodways, as evinced by a long history of home-entertaining and recipe collections, including the best-selling and influential "Charleston Receipts," first published in 1950.

Ingredients

Seemingly forever, Charleston has been subscribing to the farm-to-table philosophy. The region's shrimp, grits and Carolina gold rice will spoil you for just about any other city's harvest.

Shopping

The Charleston Farmers Market — with artisans and food vendors, pottery makers and boiled-peanut purveyors — has been ranked as one of the nation's best, but it's not open year-round. In contrast, day-to-day food shopping is unremarkable. A handful of stores offer kitchenware and cookbooks by local notables.

Variety

For a city of about 125,000 people, Charleston enjoys a respectable mix of high- and low-end dining establishments and noteworthy watering holes. Less available: culinary representation from around the world.

Service

Restaurant waitstaffs are eager and friendly, but with some exceptions they lack the polish found in bigger markets.

Depression. It's possible, in other words, for contemporary restaurant-goers to experience the flavors of yesteryear. Proof that not all sesame seeds taste alike (and time travel is possible): the field-fragrant benne seeds produced by Anson Mills.

Having sampled most of the city's all-stars over the years — Fig, I'm pleased to report, remains as luscious as ever, and if there's a single dish you have to try, it's shrimp 'n' grits at the cozy Hominy Grill — I zeroed in on Charleston's young crop of restaurants on my most recent visits.



The best and brightest, I found, have come up with creative ways of serving tradition, sometimes in casual environments in parts of the city unaccustomed to hipster restaurants. Witness the inclusion of masa and sofrito in a bowl of shrimp and grits at *Minero*, the habanero-hot Mexican joint from Sean Brock. Or the Asian small plates at *Xiao Bao Biscuit*, a onetime gas station.

[Recipe: Minero Shrimp and Masa Grits]

Leon's Fine Poultry & Oysters doesn't try to hide its past: Garage doors and overhead rafters link it to a paint and body shop. Food fans flock there for fried, cayenne-colored chicken that gets its sass from hot sauce and honey, its richness from lard. Fried clams nestled in lettuce wraps are their equal. The list of liquids sums up the restaurant's high-low attitude: "Chean Beer" is a Coors draft for \$2.50. "Extensive

Clockwise from top left: Shrimp and grits served at Husk in Charleston; meat sauce (top) and Geechie frites (bottom) under preparation in the kitchen at Obstinate Daughter on Sullivan Island; spicy fried chicken from Leon's Fine Poultry and Oysters in Charleston.

Champagne” is a bottle of Krug for \$175.

Making a splash at the other end of the spectrum, in terms of both decor and food, is the Ordinary. A spinoff of chef Mike Lata’s Fig, the newcomer retains the majestic bones of the bank it used to be and offers an ocean of local fish and seafood on its menu. Be sure to catch the smoked oysters, served with hot sauce and a stack of saltines brushed with butter, and hush puppies containing sweet diver scallops in every golden orb (and best dunked in chowchow tartar sauce). Clever ideas abound – amberjack schnitzel, anyone? – but never at the expense of good taste. Ordinary? Extraordinary is more like it at this dining dock, which, like many of the popular places I visited, keeps its lights, but also its sound levels, low. (Are you listening, New York and San Francisco?)

Like every major market, Charleston is crazy for charcuterie. One of the most anticipated openings of last year was Artisan Meat Share on blossoming Spring Street, from the chef of the swanky Cypress. A meat case greets customers at the door with pork chops and kielbasa for home consumption; a counter running nearly the length of the market is weighted down with sandwiches that could easily fuel two diners. Picture braunschweiger and Swiss cheese on potato bread; a “bun mi” packed with pâté, smoked ham, kimchi mayonnaise and more on a raft of a steamed bun; and porchetta stuffed with pork cracklings, watercress and melting onions on ciabatta. If the fillings are universal, the sides – pea and peanut salad, corn and okra salad – remind you you’re squarely in the South.

A refined version of typically rustic Frogmore stew – yet another Charleston signature – got a verbal high five from prolific cookbook author Nathalie Dupree, my guest at the Obstinate Daughter on nearby Sullivan’s Island. A far cry from the traditional low-country boil, it was the best version of this dish to wash over my lips.

Dupree also approved of the spaghetti and clams, scattered with “Clammer Dave’s” sweet clams; Dave Belanger’s clams and oysters, sustainably culled from barrier island waters north of Charleston, grace some of the top menus in the city. At the Obstinate Daughter, Geechie frites are a side dish of note: Lincoln Logs of fried grits that are crisp outside, fluffy within – corn porn. Geechie refers to Geechie Boy Mill, whose owners pass heirloom corn through antique gristmills to create some of the tastiest grits I’ve ever tried.

No surprise for a Southern city, the drinking is on par with the eating here. Of the younger crop of watering holes, the Belmont serves excellent versions of classic cocktails in a clubby

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storefront; entertainment comes by way of black-and-white movies played on a wall in the rear.

True to its name, the Gin Joint offers 70 types of gin along with other spirits, the finest of which are locked behind chicken-wire cages. A section of the menu called "Bartender's Choice" invites customers to pick two words from a list of 16 descriptors and let the beard behind the counter create something special. "Smoky" and "strong" got me a Haitian Divorce, decreed by equal parts rum and mezcal, plus sherry and orange bitters. "We may not change your life," the Gin Joint's Web site says, "but we can help you drink proper." True, that.

Husk Bar, an exposed brick counterpoint to Husk restaurant next door, is awash in bourbon — so-called brown water — a draw (along with hamburgers) for the staff of the Charleston-based Garden & Gun magazine, the South's answer to Lucky Peach.

At the city's scattered meat-and-three restaurants, examples of the African-American contribution to the cuisine, there's no need to reinvent dishes that are satisfying just the way they are. Foremost among them are Bertha's Kitchen (head for the okra soup), Martha Lou's Kitchen (where the greeting is as welcoming as the chicken and sides) and the occasional storefront such as Dave's Carry-Out, where the "atmosphere" consists of someone deftly manning a fryer, plus a few card tables for eating your order on the spot. The whiting, shrimp and pork chop (sandwich) are all fried, and all terrific.



Needed: A little polish

If Charleston has raps, they include pockets of old thinking and doses of provincialism. Hometown pride is as ubiquitous as azaleas here. "You feel it in the air, see it in the architecture, hear it in the accent," says Brock. Although Husk helped put the town on the food lover's map, the long-running Fig seems to be more beloved by locals. "Anything gets too hot," says Lee, the

The (sort of) signing chefs of Charleston

At Fig the kitchen staff has a vocal way of remembering orders of upscale local fare.



PHOTOS | The Washington Post's Tom Sietsema takes a culinary tour of the Palmetto state capital.

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As for food shopping, "It's hard to put together a proper meal in a single store," says the critic. Farm markets, among them the award-winning Saturday one at Marion Square, help right the wrong — at least during the months they're open. (Despite its name, City Market, the historic stretch of vendors downtown, focuses more on crafts than food, and not all the wares are local.)

Another weak link in the scene is service; even at expense-account retreats in Charleston, polish can be the missing ingredient in the dining room. As in Las Vegas, where the chief industry also is tourism, Charleston restaurants don't have to care what locals think. Folks from "away," as strangers are known, are eager to take over their seats.

If I could clone any attendant, it would be Debra Gadsden from the tiny soul food purveyor Martha Lou's Kitchen, where her 85-year-old mother, Martha Lou Gadsden, still fusses over the corn bread and chitterlings. Modestly dressed with pink curtains in the windows and oilcloth covers on the tables, the cinder-block quarters are supremely gracious thanks to Debra, who invites me to "sit anywhere your little heart desires" and drops off tastes of three side dishes — lima beans, melting cabbage, smoky rice — as she cautions that a request for fried chicken and shrimp requires patience. "The meats are cooked to order," she explains.

Ten minutes later, she wants me to know that I haven't been forgotten. Out comes a gratis dish of freshly washed grapes and

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strawberries.

Martha Lou's craggy golden chicken and bursting-with-juices shrimp are well worth the wait. Honestly, though, Debra had me at the door.



Clockwise from top left: An oyster shucker prepares an oyster platter at the Ordinary in Charleston; chef Jason Stanhope and sous chef Braydon Sutherland work the line at Fig in Charleston; servers prepare for dinner at the Ordinary in Charleston.

Editor's picks



Recipe: Frogmore Chowder



Recipe: Diver Scallop Hush Puppies With