

Charleston charms with elegant past, modern vitality

Tracey Teo, For The Tennessean 11:02 p.m. CDT March 29, 2015



(Photo: Wesley K.H. Teo)

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Charleston, S.C. — Some vacations require lots of planning, but to enjoy Charleston, all you have to do is show up. On a spring morning, I set out in the historical district of South Carolina's oldest city with no plan whatsoever, strolling among majestic antebellum homes with expansive verandas and carefully tended gardens blooming with dew-kissed azaleas. When I paused to photograph one of these pastel-hued architectural grande dames, a frisky Labradoodle came to the gate to check out the stranger loitering just steps from his home, but being a well-bred Southerner, he remembered his manners and wagged his tail in greeting.

Charleston boasts many well-preserved house museums, such as the circa 1806 Nathaniel Russell House, a neoclassical marvel on lower Meeting Street with a truly impressive spiral staircase, and the 1825 Edmondston-Alston House on East Battery, which overlooks Charleston Harbor and Fort Sumter, the site of the first shots of the Civil War. I planned to tour these later, but on this day I was more interested in historical residences inhabited by modern Charlestonians — even if I could only admire the exterior.

Occasionally, the rhythmic clapping of a horse would alert me that a carriage teeming with camera-toting visitors was coming my way. Ordinarily, I would dismiss the idea of a horse-and-carriage ride as cheesy and overtly touristy, but in Charleston it seemed as natural as sipping iced tea on the front porch, and I vowed to sign up for one myself.

Historical elegance

Most of this coastal city is so elegant and unblemished, it's hard to imagine it as a burned-out shell after a mysterious fire blazed through at tornado-like speed in 1861, followed by years of bombardment by Union forces during the Civil War.

The Charleston skyline is devoid of towering skyscrapers; instead it is pierced by countless historical church steeples, earning Charleston the moniker of the "Holy City."

I would have walked right past the Circular Congregational Church on Meeting Street, never realizing it was a National Historic Landmark, but the gate was open, and I took it as an invitation to go inside. Founded in 1681 by Protestant dissenters (non-Anglicans) when Charleston was a young colony called "Charles Towne," the church is home to one of the oldest continuously worshipping congregations in the South. When the current church, a handsome example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, was built around 1890, it was considered modern and progressive, much like the congregation that worshiped there.



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Old graveyards have always captivated me, so I followed a path behind the church that ended at the oldest burial ground in the city. A maze of tombstones and monuments spanning four centuries marks the final resting place of generations of worshipers. It may seem macabre, but I found myself speculating on how the deceased met their ends. Childbirth? Yellow fever? Malaria? Anyone tempted to romanticize the Old South should remember that even in affluent Charleston, life could be uncertain.

I continued down Meeting Street to the bustling Charleston City Market in the heart of downtown. A commercial center since the early 1800s, this string of long, tunnel-like buildings is where local vendors and craftspeople sell their wares, most notably the famous sweetgrass baskets that are synonymous with coastal South Carolina.

This distinctive basket-making tradition can be traced back centuries to West Africa. During the antebellum era, slaves on Lowcountry plantations made the baskets and used them to winnow rice. Today, the artfully designed baskets are much sought-after souvenirs.

New traditions in an old city

Charleston is a historical city, but it's not frozen in time. That's especially true of its dynamic, world-class food scene, which is continually evolving. Here, award-winning chefs are as ubiquitous as hot combread.

These days, foodies buzz about the cooking school at Zero George Street, a 16-room boutique hotel and restaurant that opened only two years ago in the quiet Ansonborough neighborhood.

Five historic Federal-style buildings with elegant verandas surround a tranquil courtyard studded with towering palms. For me, the experience was more akin to visiting a friend's old Southern home than staying in a hotel.

Demonstration-style cooking classes are taught by 30-year-old executive chef Vinson Petrillo, a rising star on the Charleston culinary scene who has appeared on the Food Network. In June, Petrillo will represent the U.S. at Expo Milano, competing against 10 other chefs from around the world for the title S. Pellegrino Young Chef 2015.

Because the kitchen and the office share space in an old carriage house, I kept running into Petrillo prepping for his cooking classes. One day he was deftly filleting an enormous red snapper, and I stopped to chat.

He said the fish would be pan-roasted until it had a delicious, crispy skin. It's a relatively simple dish and perfect for his ever-growing numbers of health-conscious diners.

"Nowadays, people want simple, fresh food," Petrillo said. "They don't want those super-heavy meals where you feel uncomfortable because you ate too much steak."

Seafood fits the bill nicely, and there's no shortage of it in Charleston, so he frequently demonstrates cooking techniques that work well for fish and are easily replicated at home.

Also new is the Vendue, a 66-room boutique hotel in the French Quarter spread out over six antebellum buildings. Following a \$5.5 million renovation, the property reopened in 2014 as an art hotel — a first for Charleston. It blends the best of the historical and the modern to create inviting spaces where you want to linger.

Nowhere is that more true than at the Drawing Room, the hotel restaurant, where artistic creations adorn both the walls and diners' plates. The menu features the expected seafood dishes, but it also includes a couple of surprises, such as spiced-glazed lamb over Moroccan cous cous and tenderloin of venison. Before dining, sip an aperitif on the hotel's rooftop bar, which offers a breathtaking view of Waterfront Park and the Charleston Harbor.

Not all of Charleston's delicious food is served in white-tablecloth restaurants. Take Leon's Oyster Shop, which opened last May in an old auto shop. It has a King Street address, so I thought it would be walkable from my hotel, but it's so far off the beaten tourist track, a pedicab would have been a better option. I almost gave up finding the joint, but I finally spotted a sunny patio with customers slurping down oysters off the half-shell and eating crunchy fried chicken.

The place has a shabby, timeworn vibe, and if I didn't know better, I would think Charlestonians had been eating at this tucked-away little gem for decades.

I loved the smoky, char-grilled oysters so much, I got a second order. Hushpuppies and fried Brussels sprouts rounded out a perfect lunch that was worth the hunt.

If you go

Where to stay:

Zero George Street Hotel, 0 George St., Charleston, (843) 817-7900, zeroGeorge.com

Where to eat:

The Drawing Room at the Vendue, 19 Vendue Range, Charleston, (800) 845-7900, thevendue.com

Leon's Oyster Shop, 698 King St., Charleston, (843) 531-6500, leonsoystershop.com

Visit:

Nathaniel Russell House, 51 Meeting St., Charleston, (843) 724-8481, historiccharleston.org

Edmondston-Alston House, 21 E. Battery St., Charleston, (843) 722-7171, edmondstonalston.com

Circular Congregational Church, 150 Meeting St., Charleston, (843) 577-6400, circularchurch.org

Charleston City Market, 188 Meeting St., Charleston, (843) 937-0920, thecharlestoncitymarket.com



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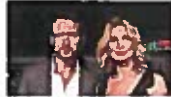


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