



**Antebellum attraction:** Oaks shade the College of Charleston's Cistern.

48 HOURS

## South Carolina Gold

Charleston's stately manors still gleam, but indie shops and top chefs give the city fresh polish | **By MARGARET LOFTUS**

**T**HE PAST LOOMS LARGE in Charleston. Residents reelected their mayor for a tenth term last November, and reminders both of a certain war that began here and of antebellum times appear everywhere. So it was a bit of a blow last year when the South Carolina port city landed on the watch lists of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the World Monument Fund, due to the recent rise in cruise-ship traffic. Locals had already been debating whether the historic district could absorb the thousands of day-trippers disgorged from cruise ships while maintaining its integrity and charm.

At the same time, a renewed creative energy has been quietly gaining strength. You'll notice it at Sean Brock's heralded restaurant Husk and at the shops young entrepreneurs and artisans are setting up on the fringes of the historic district.

**WHAT TO DO** Get your bearings with a sunrise stroll along the **Battery**, the promenade that skirts the tip of the Charleston peninsula between the Cooper and Ashley Rivers. Many of the antebellum mansions fronting the path were built by

18th-century plantation owners as summer retreats from the oppressive inland heat. The cannons in **White Point Gardens** pointing toward the water hark back to the Civil War, when the park was the city's last line of defense against attacks from Union strongholds across the harbor. From here, you can spot **Fort Sumter**, where the war began in 1861, off to the southeast.

Meander up to **Meeting Street**, peering past wrought-iron gates at the gardens of stately homes graced with Lady Banks rose vines. Several houses are open to the public, including the **Calhoun Mansion**, an Italianate manor built by local businessman George Walton Williams in 1876 as a testament to his faith in Charleston's resurgence after the Civil War.

Retail chains dominate King, the main shopping drag, but indie gems including **Worthwhile**, a boutique that carries edgy women's wear labels such as Gasa and Gary Graham, warrant a perusal. **Heirloom Books**, a paean to cookbooks vintage and hot off the press, joined established clothing shops and antiques stores along lower King when it opened last summer. To brush up on your Southern authors, head north to **Blue Bicycle Books**, owned

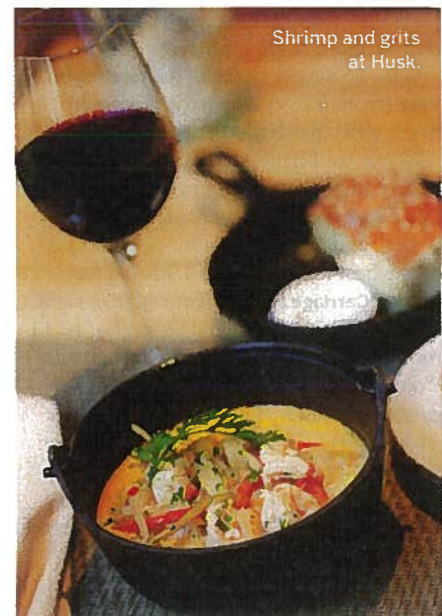
by local scribe Jonathan Sanchez, to lose yourself in the narrow aisles. "People come to Charleston to slow down and reconnect," says Sanchez, "so seeing a book signed by Margaret Mitchell or an old copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* really resonates with them."

Cobblestones once paved the streets of the French Quarter east of King. Here, more than 40 enclosed slave sites were housed, helping to make Charleston the richest city in the South. The **Old Slave Mart Museum**, opened in 2007, chronicles this trade through oral histories, letters, and artifacts, including shackles and iron-work forged by black artisans.

Graveyards are tucked throughout the **Holy City**, a nickname that partly refers to the scores of steeples that dominate the skyline. Several prominent Charlestonians are buried in the stone crypts and below the crape myrtles in the cemeteries adjacent to the 17th-century **St. Philip's Church**, including Governor Edward Rutledge, who at 26 was the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Around the block, the beaux arts **Gibbes Museum of Art** depicts the region's tumultuous history. Don't miss the ethereal watercolor landscapes by Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, part of a community of painters who used the Low Country's faded glory as romantic inspiration.

**Spoleto USA** spans only a couple of weeks in the spring, but the festival has fostered a rich performing arts tradition for a city of around 120,000, thanks to a range of venues. The grande dame is the **Dock Street Theatre**, which caught the eye of Spoleto's Italian founder, Gian Carlo Menotti, when he was scouting for a state-side host back in 1977. Constructed in



1736, Dock Street was the first building in the United States purposely constructed as a theater.

**WHERE TO EAT** Chef Sean Brock first shook up Charleston stalwart **McCrary's** with his postmodern gastronomy magic, but he has most recently won national raves for his strictly locavore **Husk**. The restaurant is located in a 19th-century French Quarter townhouse, where Brock coaxes regional heirloom ingredients, such as Carolina Gold rice and Ossabaw pork, to shine in dishes like Hoppin' John.

Fellow farm-to-table champion chef Mike Lata presides at neighborhood bistro **Fig**. No reservations? Perch at the bar and nurse a Negroni—there are nine varieties to choose from—while you wait for a starter of oysters with lemon Chardonnay mignonette.

For brunch, make the short trek across the Ashley River to the **Glass Onion**, a diner on busy Route 17, for the crispy braised pork belly with poached eggs and grits.

At lunchtime, college students usually swarm gourmet grocery **Caviar & Bananas**, so take your duck confit sourdough sandwich a block down George Street to picnic at the College of Charleston's Cistern, a courtyard shaded by trees strewn with Spanish moss. Or head uptown and find a spot at the communal table at the new **Butcher and Bee**. Its compact menu of four to six sandwiches using house-made bread changes daily, but the vegan pulled squash barbecue with smoky slaw is a recurring favorite.

**WHERE TO STAY** You'll know the **Wentworth Mansion** (from \$279), built by a wealthy cotton merchant, by its mansard roof and cupola. The elaborate interior of the 21-room inn features original Tiffany glass panels and marble mantels.

The 15 ample suites at **Restoration on King** (from \$269) come with exposed brick walls, hardwood floors, full kitchens, washers, and dryers. A picnic breakfast is delivered to your door every morning, and bikes and iPads are available.

Bed-and-breakfasts abound, but one of the best located is the 19th-century **Battery Carriage House** (from \$150), right on White Point Gardens. Several of its 11 rooms are reportedly haunted, such as Room 10, said to be visited by a ghostly gentleman caller. The **King George IV Inn** (from \$99) is in a circa 1790 Charleston single—a one-room-wide house with a two-story veranda (or piazza, as it's known locally). The ten guest rooms boast fireplaces and antiques. ■

## [ ON FOOT ]

**WEST OF KING STREET**

*Head to this neighborhood for one-of-a-kind Charleston finds*

A clutch of funky boutiques and stylish cafés have cropped up west of King Street in Charleston's Cannonborough-Elliottborough neighborhood in the past year. Find them in and among the one-room-wide Charleston singles in this mostly residential area. "It's become a hotbed for creative businesses," says Rhett Boyd, who opened his surf shop on Spring Street last year.

Start your day with a plate of shrimp and grits at neighborhood anchor **Horniny Grill** (1). One of those rare spots beloved by visitors and locals alike, the restaurant recently expanded its space without sacrificing its familiar bead-board walls and tin ceiling. Then head east on Cannon Street to **Indigo and Cotton** (2), a handsome menswear shop that specializes in American heritage brands such as Quoddy moccasins. Slip across the street to the tiny jewel box that is **Mac & Murphy** (3) to browse chic stationery, including retro-cool letterpress cards made locally.

Time for a treat yet? **Sugar Bakeshop's** (4) owners, a couple of former New York architects, hit the cupcake lotto with their

Lady Baltimore version, studded with sherry-soaked figs.

Leigh Magar (*below*) makes hats the old-fashioned way, using blocks and hand-stitching, so each is one of a kind. Barneys New York is a client, as are a slew of celebrities, including R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe. Visit Magar's 19th-century house cum studio **Magar Hatworks** (5) by appointment for a look at her latest creations.

A few blocks away is Boyd's **Rogue Wave Surf Shop** (6); the gregarious owner can fill you in on local surfing conditions and make sure you've got the right board and gear

from his well-edited selection.

Amble over to St. Philip Street to **Redux** (7), an arts center for contemporary works such as the recent origami installation by artist Liz Miller.

A feast awaits at **Two Boroughs Larder** (8), where Philadelphia transplants Heather and Josh Keeler offer a stand-out menu heavy on local bounty. Try the Magwood pickled shrimp or the crispy pig head sandwich with blue cheese, fried egg, and wilted greens. —M.L.



Magar Hatworks.

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