A Toast to Charleston’s New Classic
South Carolina chefs give Lowcountry shrimp a global spin.

by Brys Stephens  photographs by Christopher Shane

GROWING UP IN Alabama, I spent summers on the Florida Panhandle, where our family would often boil Gulf shrimp along with corn, potatoes, and sausages, and serve it all strewn over newspaper. But it was when I moved to Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, that I really began to appreciate the importance of shrimp to the culture and cooking of the Lowcountry, a roughly 220-mile stretch of coastal South Carolina and Georgia. Shrimp spawn in the waters off the beaches. Then the young ones ride the tides through the inlets into the vast network of waterways, and settle throughout the marsh tidal creeks, where local residents often catch them. The grown survivors eventually head back out to sea to spawn, perhaps to be snared by trawling fishermen.

Shrimp boils have long been synonymous with Lowcountry social occasions of all kinds. Day in day out, however, the most identifiable Lowcountry dish is shrimp and grits (sometimes called “breakfast shrimp”): boiled shrimp adorned with little more than butter or bacon, salt, and pepper, and ladled over grits. In 1985, when New York Times food critic Craig Claiborne wrote about chef Bill Neal’s shrimp and cheese grits at Crook’s Corner restaurant in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, chefs all over the South and in Charleston—the cultural capital of the Lowcountry—elaborated on the dish’s original simplicity, adding such ingredients as heavy cream and tasso ham.

Recently, several Charleston chefs have begun to put far-reaching spins on the popular crustacean. “Looking at menus now, you might say shrimp paired with bread or toast is Charleston’s new iconic dish,” says restaurateur Brooks Reitz, co-owner of Leon’s Oyster Shop, which has featured various incarnations of shrimp toast, including a shrimp salad with mayonnaise and celery on a grilled roll. “We have such a great local seafood culture,” he says, “but we also wanted to look outside of the South for inspiration. Our shrimp roll takes its cue from the lobster rolls of the Northeast.”

Ten blocks away at Xiao Bao Biscuit, chef-owner Josh Walker incorporates the flavors of fish sauce and lime leaf into his
shrimp toast. "Shrimp toast is often found on old-school Chinese-American menus," Walker says. "But the origin of our version is the French influence in Vietnam, which in many ways ties in perfectly with this climate, this place. We have ingredients like fresh chilies and lemongrass available here, too."

At the bustling brewpub Edmund’s Oast, the unique twist is chef Andy Henderson’s pickled shrimp. "The initial inspiration for the dish was this rye bread from the EVO Craft Bakery in North Charleston," Henderson says. "It’s hearty bread, and it made me think of Scandinavia. I thought the pickled shrimp would be a great contrast, and I’m proud we do a classic dish in a different way."

Longtime Charleston food writer and author Jeff Allen says the embrace of international cuisines is more than just a trend. "Right now, there’s a big move toward the cosmopolitan, and the acceptance of outside influence," he says. "People are taking these local ingredients and reinterpreting them. That wasn’t always accepted around here. Chefs are pushing the cuisine forward by introducing dishes that aren’t necessarily traditional. And that’s a big story."

WHERE TO EAT SHRIMP TOAST IN CHARLESTON

1. THE ORDINARY
   At his white-tiled seafood brasserie and oyster bar, chef Mike Lata looks to a New Orleans classic, barbecued shrimp, to work his magic. He poaches head-on shrimp in a creamy sauce infused with Worcestershire and sets them atop charred sourdough. 544 King St., (843) 414-7060, eattheordinary.com

2. LEON’S OYSTER SHOP
   Leon’s is a meticulously renovated auto-body shop famous for oysters and fried chicken. But don’t miss chef Ari Kolender’s shrimp roll—lightly dressed with horseradish mayo and served on a bun grilled to crunchy perfection. 698 King St., (843) 531-6500, leonsoystershop.com

3. EDMUND’S OAST
   This cavernous brewpub has a wide-open kitchen, a long bar, tall communal tables, and a patio shaded by live oaks. If you can, grab a seat at the chef’s counter and watch Andy Henderson spread creamy aioli on locally made rye bread, and top it with a mound of pickled shrimp and vegetables and a garnish of fresh herbs and chervil leaves. 1081 Morrison Dr., (843) 727-1145, edmunds oast.com

4. XIAO BAO BISCUIT
   XBB, as locals call it, occupies a remodeled and brightly furnished former gas station. Order the Vietnamese-style shrimp toast, a purée of local shrimp, fish sauce, garlic, ginger, lime leaf, and chilies spread on baguette slices, then pan-fried: crispy and satisfying. 224 Rutledge Ave., xiaobao biscuit.com