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A food revolution in Charleston, US

Charleston, South Carolina, is gaining a reputation among food lovers for its expertise with slow-cooked traditional southern food

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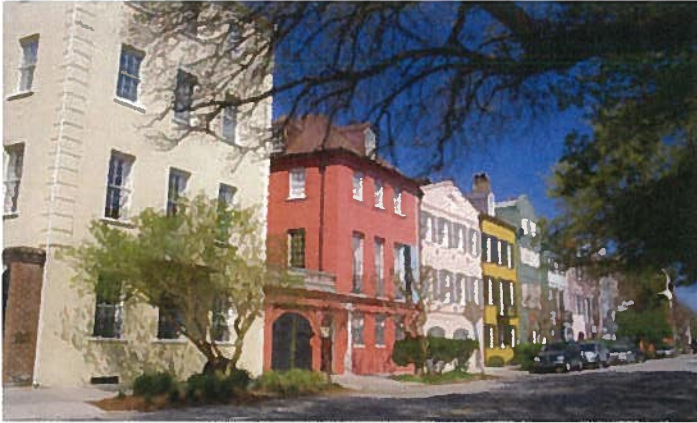
18th-century homes on the promenade at Battery Park, Charleston. Photograph: Getty Images

Of the many accolades bestowed on Charleston, South Carolina, the most prestigious is probably Best City in America (in the eyes of the readers of Condé Nast Traveller, anyway). But I'm more interested in two of its more specific boasts: its growing reputation as a gourmet hotspot – where slow-cooked, traditional Southern food is experiencing a revival – and the fact that it was voted Sexiest City in America by the readers of Travel + Leisure magazine. What more incentive does a greedy single girl need to head down south?

Before I've had a chance to size up the local talent, I am seduced by the prettiness of the genteel port city itself. Founded by the English in 1670, it has picturesque streets lined with palm trees and original, old-timey gas lamps, in front of pastel-painted townhouses with pillars and porches, just begging for a languid afternoon spent lounging with a mint julep. Still so low-rise is the perfectly preserved city that a cruise liner parked in the harbour looms over the rooftops and spires like an ocean-going Godzilla.

My first pit stop is at a tiny diner, the Dixie Supply Bakery & Café (dixiecafecharleston.com) at 62 State Street. It's only open for breakfast and lunch, and most of the menu hovers around the \$5 mark. Famed throughout the state for its tomato pie – flavour-packed tomatoes layered with cheese, garlic, basil and spring

onions, in a pie crust, served in slices with a hunk of homemade amber-coloured cornbread – it also specialises in the rib-sticking southern dish of shrimp and grits. Grits – a semolina-like paste, made from ground corn cooked with milk and cream – is something of an acquired taste, which, I must confess, I have not yet acquired.



Shops in Rainbow

Row, Charleston. Photograph: Getty Images

While the city has a growing reputation among the foodie fraternity, and was an early adopter of the locally grown movement, its cuisine is firmly anchored in the past – from rustic barbecue joints to a rash of new fine-dining restaurants. These include the award-winning Husk (huskrestaurant.com) named Best New Restaurant in America by Bon Appétit magazine in 2011, where nothing grown or farmed outside of the south is served.

English settlers arriving here in the 17th century made full use of the pigs left behind by the Spanish, and found its protected peninsula teeming with hundreds of species of seafood. Native Americans taught them which crops would thrive in the swampy, alligator-infested environment, namely corn, sierra beans, and squash. And the arrival of a wave of French Huguenots in the 18th century, drawn by the city's pledge of religious tolerance to all, brought desserts to the party, plus even more emphasis on pork, introducing charcuterie and cassoulets.

Less nobly, Charleston was also the centre of the slave trade in the 18th century: three out of four enslaved Africans arrived in America through this port city. But the ships which docked in the harbour brought with them not only slaves but also cooking and farming practices, introducing rice, okra – eaten fried or in soup – collard greens, aubergines and peanuts. And after more than half a century of celebrating convenience foods, the Lowcountry, as the region is known, is returning – like much of America – to its culinary roots.

Central to this is barbecue – by which the locals mainly mean pork, the definitive ingredient of southern cooking. At Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Que at 288 King Street, I round off a day of non-stop munching with tender pulled pork, slow-cooked for seven hours, and served with a cheese biscuit (which is nothing like a biscuit, and something like a scone), and collard greens, boiled with and flavoured by juicy lumps of bacon.



Peninsula Grill's

coconut cake, Charleston

Charleston's compact size makes it one of the few US cities where it is possible to spend a few days without needing a car. But while exploring the city on foot helps you digest all that hearty southern food, it also means you may end up walking past Kaminsky's Baking Company (kaminskys.com) on N Market Street, famed for its desserts and, dangerously, open until 2am. Just as perilous is Market Street Sweets up the road, with its lip-smacking pralines, peanut brittle and bear-claw caramels. A uniformed temptress calls "Free samples" from the doorway, like the child-catcher in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Next door, the Peninsula Grill (peninsulagrill.com) serves its celebrated, sensual coconut cake in 1lb slabs, for sharing.

As I stagger home, trying to dodge the sweet treats, I realise, a little too late, that I have assiduously road-tested the cuisine, but not surveyed the city's sexiness. But with my mind now firmly on finding something with a stretchy waistband, the men of Charleston will just have to wait for another, less gluttonous, day.

• *Flights to Charleston were provided by US Airways (usairways.com), which flies from Gatwick to Charleston, via Charlotte, North Carolina, from £555 return. Accommodation was provided by Embassy Suites (+1 843 723 6900, embassysuites3.hilton.com) which has two-room suites from \$259 a night. For more information on Charleston and South Carolina see scprt.com and explorecharleston.com*

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