

Photo by Andrew Colunga

CHARLESTON

28 Best Restaurants in Charleston

28 PHOTOS

by STEPHANIE BURT and ALLSTON MCCRADY
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Whether it's seafood, barbecue, fine dining, or something else you crave—we've got it covered.



Technically, Charleston is classified as a small city—but it's a mighty force on the nation's food scene. For years now it's known for its dynamic mix of offerings—classic Southern food, like Lowcountry cuisine and barbecue done at peak levels, alongside fresh Eastern seafood, and innovative kitchens with creative chefs who redefine what we think of as farm-to-table cooking. Sean Brock's vision for the new South at Husk Charleston makes stellar use of the region's ingredients; while at Fig, those seasonal ingredients and Southern classics are served in an upscale bistro setting. Don't worry—the city's top places for a burger, oysters, dessert, and fried chicken, too, are on our list. We've looked at all categories, neighborhoods (like the ever-popular downtown Charleston restaurants), as well as a mix of the old and the new, to create our list of the city's best places to eat. If we have one piece of advice, it's to come hungry.





Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

Husk →

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Husk breathes life into a two-story late 19th century home with Queen Anne-style facade. This is the restaurant that kicked off the Sean Brock empire, the first place to go to experience his "new South" vision for the region's cuisine. Only Brock and his anointed executive chef Travis Grimes can take a pig's ear and transform it into an epiphany, reduced to shatteringly crunchy strips and nestled in a straight-from-the-garden lettuce wrap along with paper thin strips of sweet and mildly tangy cucumbers and red onions, all dolloped with creamy, smoky togarashi sauce (a firm nod to Brock's international travels and inspirations). The menu changes regularly, but the dinner rolls are a constant, sprinkled with benne seeds and bourbon-barrel-smoked salt, served in a locally crafted sweetgrass basket with pork-infused butter for dredging. The bar is technically a separate, adjacent building, and a destination in its own right. Whatever your preference, be sure to genuflect at the altar of canned and pickled vegetables upstairs in backlit mason jars.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

Fig →

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Old enough to be considered an institution, but still creative enough to wow the locals who have favored it for years, Fig is one of Charleston's biggest success stories. Owned by Mike Lata, the kitchen is run by James Beard winner Jason Stanhope, who brings his South American background and French technique to Southern cuisine, creating dishes like fish stew provençal, made with locally caught white shrimp, squid, mussels, and Carolina gold rice.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

Rodney Scott's BBQ →

5

Chances are, the smell of smoking pork hits you before you get to the restaurant's front door, which faces King Street with a row of full-length windows framed in blue. Blue and red are the main accents here, an industrial and clean design so patrons remember it's all about the food—served in classic red baskets lined by paper that soaks up the vinegar-based barbecue sauce as it dribbles from an overflowing pulled pork sandwich. Beyond the pork, there is a killer mac and cheese, some smoked chicken, and some BBQ ribs you might have to fight someone for. It's counter-service, so make sure you've got your order pinned down before it's your turn—no one wants to be the cause for a back-up here.

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The Best Small Cities in the World



Courtesy Xiao Bao Biscuit

RESTAURANT

Xiao Bao Biscuit →

5

For a taste of something outside of fried green tomatoes and sweet tea, head to Xiao Bao Biscuit on the corner of Rutledge Ave and Spring Street. Here you'll find a beautiful marriage of Asian and Chinese soul food, with spicy dishes like Thai yellow curry with mung bean cakes, Japanese cabbage pancakes with pork "candy," or local snapper prepared with Chinese spices and seasoned greens. Inside a converted gas station, it's popular for business and casual meals among the creative class.





Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

Le Farfalle →

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What is so beautiful about this restaurant is that it is Italian and Charleston at the same time, a bit like a rambling Italian seaside restaurant tucked just a block off King Street. There is a charming courtyard perfect for brunch in dappled sunlight, a formal dining room with high-backed wooden booths, but for most people (just like the kitchen at a good house party), the bar is the heart of the restaurant. Although firmly in the "tourist district," it is still firmly a neighborhood spot. You can pop in for a happy hour bite of fried mozzarella sticks (so retro), enjoy a plate of rigatoni verde and a glass of wine at the bar, or go all out with courses and spend the evening there. Standouts include the Fideos with toasted angel hair pasta and local shrimp, a filling Warm Rosemary Focaccia served with whipped ricotta, anything from the excellent vegetable selections, and Octopus Carpaccio, a fan favorite.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

The Ordinary →

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Housed in a 1920s bank building, the high ceilings and expansive room—designed with clean white tile and black wood accents—is elegant in a simple, Parisian cafe sort of way. The website says "fancy seafood," and this is *the* place for it in the city. Don't miss: oysters on the half shell, crudo, the lobster roll, or the crispy oyster slider, since it's something that most people who frequent get every time, no matter the choices for the rest of the meal. This bar has an impressive collection of rum, so the cocktail list is divided into "With Rum" and "Without Rum" categories, with 12 in the former.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

McCrary's Tavern →

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The cobblestone alley entrance, the brick arches, the dark woods and the creaky wood floors all suggest colonial Charleston, and they're right on point, since this place originally opened as McCrady's Tavern in 1778. It's been a lot of things in between, including a Sean Brock fine-dining mecca, until he reimagined it once again as a tavern with food that recalls the Gilded Age—its current iteration. Creative, adventurous, calling-to-the-classics, with executions that range from high-low (caviar and tater tots, and a bernaise-bursting burger) to mainly high (escargot-stuffed marrow bone and local clams stuffed with deviled crab).



Photo by Leslie Ryann McEllar

RESTAURANT

Millers All Day →

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If Pinterest or Instagram influencers had a dream diner, Millers All Day might be it. It's breakfast all day (or at least until 7 p.m.), but it isn't boring or typical, especially since the chefs use heirloom grains and local ingredients as a jumping off point for creativity. On the sweet side of things, the waffles are a riff on bananas Foster, with edges that stay deliciously crispy up against the sorghum syrup and the meringue topper. Despite the internet phenomenon that are the unicorn (pink) grits, the star of the menu is fast becoming the Hoppin' Johns, a Sea Island Red Pea Lowcountry classic that is typical on many Lowcountry menus. They've got every type of coffee you could want, but great beer and bubbly, too.



Courtesy Zero Restaurant + Bar

RESTAURANT

Zero Restaurant + Bar →

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A molecular gastronomy experience that draws seasoned diners as well as a pre-theater crowd (the Galliard is down the street). There are three separate tasting menus: one for omnivores, one for herbivores, and an abbreviated menu for those going to the theater, with beverage pairings included for the first two. Let go of the reins and allow Chef Vinson Petrillo to direct the experience: this is the kind of place that leaves you intellectually satisfied, as well as sated.





Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

The Grocery →

\$

Locals and eaters who dig locally sourced ingredients come for this fresh take on Lowcountry cuisine. Chef Kevin Johnson was a vegetarian for a decade, so he approaches vegetables with the respect they deserve, not as an afterthought to protein. All the ingredients are as local as possible, but the flavors primarily come from the Mediterranean rim. Expect harissa seasons carrots, triggerfish garnished with marcona almond, and lamb loin with farro tabouli—and don't skip the house dirty martini, made with pickled tomato juice.



Photo by Cassandra Michelle

RESTAURANT

167 Raw →

\$

The line in front of 167 Raw, a tiny but mighty fresh seafood haunt, forms at 10:30 a.m., a half hour before it opens—and it's like this all day. Queue up—the maitre d' will pour drinks while you wait—and when you finally nab your coveted seat, settle in for as much fresh seafood as you can handle. Think raw bar items, crudos, tacos, po' boys, and "favorites," like the market-priced lobster roll. This is a kitchen that has fun with whatever fresh seafood rolls through the door, so there's always something new to try: arctic char dumplings, shrimp boudin balls, uni toast, golden tile aguachile. And despite the line outside, you won't be rushed by the staff.



RESTAURANT

Hominy Grill →

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If the bowl of grits above the restaurant name on the front door wasn't enough, the beadboard walls, tin ceilings, wood floors, and wooden chairs all are clues you've walked into a classic eatery that serves comfort food. Before there was a big brunch scene in Charleston, there was Robert Stehling and his Charleston Nasty biscuit, and that, along with his shrimp and grits, perfectly fried okra, collards, and fried catfish, is as on point as ever. Saving room for dessert is difficult, but if it can be done, the chocolate pudding has a strong, local cult following. Cocktails, brunch-style cocktails to be exact, are the best move here, including a classic Bloody Mary and a Mexican Coffee with Don Pedro brandy and Kahlua. Additionally, a few draft beers are available, and there's a small but mighty wine list with some lovely and affordable European whites with good acidity to cut through all that gravy.

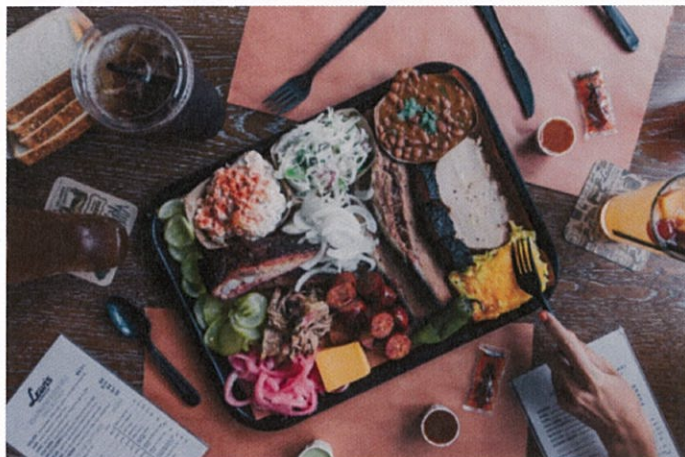


Photo by Nico Schinco

RESTAURANT

Lewis Barbecue →

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A little off the beaten path of the downtown corridor, Lewis Barbecue, one of the city's newer joints, is worth the added travel time. Renowned Austin pit master John Lewis steers the food program, and the menu is simple, but abundant—large slabs of slow-smoked, melt-in-your-mouth brisket, smoked sausages, and an array of sides, like fluffy cornbread and tangy coleslaw. Here, it's all about the tray, and once you go through the line, chances are you will have one stacked with hedonistic glory. One of the best parts of the experience are the staff, who slice and portion your meats on the plate. They're quick to offer a sample, suggestion, or lay "just one more slice" on your tray before you leave their station. It feels fun, like a friendly picnic for a meat-loving club.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

Minero →

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Sean Brock's Mexican-meets-Charleston casual restaurant pleases all palates with a love for tacos and an aversion for long waits. The cocktail game is strong here, and if

you are a tequila or a mezcal fan, prepare to spend some time with the list, which is extensive and includes headers such as "Single Village" and "Extra Anejo." Food-wise, it's imaginative, whimsical, but with a perfect pitch for ingredient pairings in the space between. A local ingredient such as benne seed is filtered through a Mexican lens and comes out as a salsa reminiscent of tahini, while Southern farm-raised catfish shows up on tacos, and all platters come with a side of Lowcountry hoppin' john.



Photo by Robert Donovan

RESTAURANT

The Glass Onion →

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If you've found a spot in the parking lot, consider yourself lucky—but it's not some buzzy new boîte. Walk in, and this simple place sits comfortably in the tradition of Southern diners, where meat-and-threes, counter service, and simple wooden tables carry way more weight than a well-poured drink. Stand and peruse the huge chalkboard menu and—we know, there are so many choices—try to come to a decision before you reach the counter. You've probably heard about the shrimp po' boy, the catfish, the grits, and the lemon meringue pie so high you could use it as a pillow, but that's really just the beginning. Things on the menu seem simple, like shrimp and grits and bread pudding—but behind that simplicity is high-level execution from a chef who honed his skills in fine dining. Breaded seafood is light and crispy; grits preparation is perfection; and pickles are put up yearly by the kitchen staff, made from local stuff.



Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

The Macintosh →

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The Macintosh was one of the first places to anchor the now crowded Upper King restaurant district, and it wowed with its dark detailing, exposed beams, and historic brick lovingly preserved from a bygone Charleston era. But it's always been about the food here—protein-centric and often rich—and inviting people to join you in enjoying it. This is a meeting place, both at the bar and the tables, and it feels bustling because it usually is. Although things like the burger, lamb rack, or deckle might woo you upon first menu perusal, don't skip over the seafood, such as soft-shell crab in season or flounder with horseradish.



Photo by Peter Frank Edwards

RESTAURANT

Leon's Oyster Shop →

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Leon's Oyster Shop has been drawing in hungry Charlestonians since it opened its doors in 2014. Though its scruffy, whitewashed façade is often overlooked by tourists, Leon's is known the South over for its fried chicken sandwich, which has the power to send a vegetarian tumbling off the wagon. The breading uses seafood seasoning and the tender filet is topped with Duke's mayo and Asian slaw tossed with fish sauce. Plus, the brioche buns are baked daily and grilled just enough to get that perfect crispy exterior and soft, pillowy interior.



Photo by Constantine Giavos

RESTAURANT

Stella's →

\$

An unabashed love letter to owner Steven Niketas' Greek heritage and to founding chef Stella Dikos. This is an embracing, communal spot. These are all classic Greek dishes, and lots of them. Start with meze to share, some mild and meaty (keftedes, kreatopita), others salty and bold, like "marides," battered and fried smelt with a traditionally aggressive garlic skordalia sauce. Pastas can tinge exotic, with

unexpected notes of clove and nutmeg. Save room for a dessert of loukoumades: little honey-rich pastry puffs traditionally awarded to Olympic winners in ancient Greece.



Photo by Olivia Rae James

RESTAURANT

Chez Nous →

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Each day, Chef Jill Mathias writes out the menu by hand: two appetizers, two entrees, and two desserts. The menu is the same at lunch as it is at dinner, and what ensues is a daily dinner party of sorts. It's seasonal, elevated, European comfort food. There are fresh asparagus spears still crunchy under beautiful white, firm-fleshed fish, veal stew with mushrooms, bitter greens salads, crusty bread, and vanilla custard or mille feuille for dessert. Unless you follow the restaurant on social media, you never know what the meal is going to be until you're seated. Everything is simple here, including the beverage list, dominated by wines from Southern France, Northern Italy, and Northern Spain.





Courtesy Tu

RESTAURANT

Tu →

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Tu is the newest venture brought to us by the folks who knocked our socks off at Xiao Bao Biscuit. The menu divides into three sections, the first devoted to exotic and cool starters, the second more savory and vegetable-centric, the third spotlighting a few proteins. You'll want to order a jumble of dishes and share, though all are worth hogging. Agua Chile surprised with tender strips of beef cured in seaweed and suspended beneath a thin layer of acidic tomatillo water, with fresh raw serranos and little kisses of bonito mayo. Asparagus came drizzled in a creamy, horseradish "dynamite sauce" topped with vivid trout roe and encircled with whimsical shrimp hushpuppies. It's rare that a Charleston restaurant leaves you feeling that you've connected new synapses in your brain.



Courtesy Edmund's Oast

RESTAURANT

Edmund's Oast →

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Edmund's Oast, located on Morrison Drive, has been a favorite mingling spot for locals since its opening. Don't expect greasy, typical pub fare: Edmund's takes their food just as seriously as their beer, with a highly rated charcuterie program (nearly everything cured and made in house). As for the beer, the styles are a mix of American and English ones: the Tweed Jacket English Brown Ale is a crowd favorite (and with that moniker, who wouldn't love it?).



Photo by Matthew Williams

RESTAURANT

Henrietta's →

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Henrietta's branches off the main lobby of The Dewberry, so technically it is a "hotel restaurant," but don't let that deter you. For breakfast, brunch, lunch, or dinner, this is a clean and minimalist take on a classic Parisian brasserie, but think of it as a refined French Southern machine, with impeccable French technique, and friendly Southern

A French-Southern mashup, with impeccable French technique, and a heavy Southern service. Given the city's French Huguenot-rich early beginnings, that's not such a stretch. You'll see familiar brasserie items on the menu, like escargot, charcuterie, French onion soup, and steak frites, with southern thrown into the mix: oysters, deviled eggs, boudin bites, and shrimp & grits.

RESTAURANT

Bar Normandy →

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For a restaurant that consistently serves up some of this city's best food, Bar Normandy is atypical in every way. When you walk into the modest space right off Broad Street, for late afternoon oysters and drinks or for dinner, it feels like a hastily cobbled together pop-up venue. The chef (either Alex Lira or Philip Lawrence; they alternate) works behind a small counter where he preps, plates, and cooks with little more than two induction burners and a panini press. The sole server in the room will seat you as soon as he or she can, the day's cryptic menu is listed on a letter-board. Come hungry: This is a restaurant that really just wants to cook great food in a relaxed atmosphere and not overcharge its customers.



Photo by John R. Fulton

RESTAURANT

Peninsula Grill →

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The Peninsula Grill has been a fine dining institution in the city for 21 years, and it recently had a bit of a chef shuffle, but is slowly adding new dishes (for instance, a crudo with caviar and ponzu) while remaining respectful to the restaurant's tradition. Beef, and steak specifically, is the main attraction, with varying cuts, add-ons including foie gras and lobster tail, and eight sauces to accompany it. For dessert, it's all about the famous coconut cake.

RESTAURANT

Bertha's Kitchen →

\$

This place is soul food and Lowcountry cooking royalty; a counter-service icon you don't want to miss. Owned and operated by the daughters of founder Albertha Grant, those cooking your food are the ones working the line and the register. It's \$8 for a meat and two sides, so consider taking the leap and going for two entrees. There's too much to love for one styrofoam container: fried chicken, crisp and hot; fried pork chops that are tender and well-seasoned; red rice, white rice, mac and cheese; okra stew that's probably been made the same way since their grandmothers were making it; oxtails falling off the bone if they have it; fried fish if they have it; any dessert they suggest, and sweet potatoes. Sweet tea and lemonade to drink.





Photo by Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

The Darling Oyster Bar →

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The Darling Oyster Bar, one of King Street's favorite seafood bars, turns heads thanks to its airy and elegant open design, complete with station where you can sit and watch local shuckers prepare thousands of East Coast oysters every day. Start with a big platter of Carolina oysters, then dive deep into creamy shrimp and grits, which come a little spicier than other places in town. The star of the menu, though, is the monster Bloody Mary—it's topped with a hush puppy, lobster tail, king crab leg, Old Bay spiced shrimp, and a pickle.



Courtesy Charleston Grill

RESTAURANT

Charleston Grill →

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This is a place to celebrate: Chef Michelle Weaver proves that fine dining can be fun. Her menu is divided by "Shared," "Roots & Stems," "Waves & Marsh," and "Field & Pasture," eschewing the idea that courses have to be formal. Sommelier Rick Rubel's list is expansive at 39 pages, and he's usually in the house to provide spot-on recommendations based on meal, palate, and price point, and he's trained the staff to do the same.



Andrew Cebulka

RESTAURANT

The Obstinate Daughter →

without any hint of maritime kitsch). Bleached wood and pale blue seating are a calm backdrop for a bustling operation: the kitchen keeps the servers pivoting, bringing out trays from the raw bar, pizza from the wood-fired oven, and pasta and seafood dishes, too. This is the sister restaurant to Wild Olive on Johns Island, so it makes sense that it has an Italian inflection too, though interpreted through a coastal lens. There's so much on the menu worth trying, so consider sharing plates instead of hogging your own, and then set about convincing the group to go for any housemade pasta (but especially the seasonal Pappardelle), plus a pizza, and the Mepkin Abbey Mushrooms. The latter, a kale, mushroom, and egg plate, is one of the most popular dishes on the menu.

Places We Went



RESTAURANT
Husk
\$\$



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RESTAURANT
Rodney Scott's BBQ
\$



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