

LOCAL FLAVOR CHARLESTON



Punch It Up

Dine out on history with this city's iconic rice dish, paired with a cocktail that sparks the spirit

By Andrew Nelson

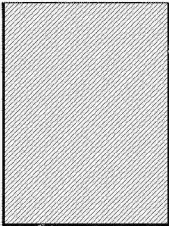
Charleston is known for conviviality, as a visit to any of its buzzing bars will reveal. It's not just the local atmosphere that makes for a lively evening. There's plenty of South Carolina history to pour in a traveler's glass as well.

"Charleston was and is a very social city," says Jennifer Bresnahan, general manager of the storied **HUSK RESTAURANT** and its annex, **THE BAR AT HUSK**. "In the late 18th to early 19th centuries, there were frequent gatherings and in-town events. At such parties, the punch bowl functioned as today's office water fountain—guests gathered around it to talk, gossip, and have conversation."

Finding inspiration in the city's spirited history, modern mixologists have returned punch to the table. Bresnahan recites a colonial-era mnemonic for punch proportions: "One of sour. Two of sweet. Three of strong. Four of weak." Husk's Light Dragoon Punch (left) combines lemon juice, peach brandy, Jamaican rum, regular brandy, and black tea. The potent result is cut with soda water and garnished with lemon zest.

But don't sip it alone, Bresnahan advises. "We're a get-out-and-meet-people town, and punch is a great way to bring people together."

Punch wasn't the only object of antebellum Charleston's affections. Eighteenth-century South Carolina grew rice, and rice grew fortunes, on the plantations lining the Low Country's rivers. Those riches became visible in the grandiose homes on the



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port city's Battery. Rice was closely associated with enslaved peoples, who are now credited by many historians and food researchers with bringing the grain from Africa. Archaeologists have found rice grains in the remains of slave ships. "Some stories have African women hiding rice in their hair," says chef Kevin Mitchell, an instructor at the Culinary Institute of Charleston who has studied African-American contributions to the city's culinary heritage.

Rice's reign in the Carolinas went into decline after the Civil War, but the grain remained a staple found in all manner of recipes. Even now Charleston dinners include hearty helpings of *perloo*, a rice dish served with shrimp or meat and akin to pilaf.

Perloo is a delightfully flexible dish, starting with its spelling (*pirloo*, *purloo*, and *pirlou* are variations). At his Midtown restaurant **THE GROCERY**, chef Kevin Johnson spells it *pilau*. His take contains Low Country seafood—fish, clams, and shrimp, mixed with field peas and a long-grain heritage rice called Charleston Gold that has found favor with regional chefs.

"Charleston Gold is aromatic and nutty," Johnson says, and resembles the rice harvested here at the time of the American Revolution. "It's harvested, milled, and stored in preindustrial style," he says, which boosts perloo's distinct flavor. However it's spelled, Charleston's famed rice dish evokes a taste for tradition and a flair for invention.

A Taste of History

THE GROCERY

Chef Kevin Johnson's restaurant is as down-to-earth as its food is elevated. A warm brick facade invites you to pull up a seat and enjoy the pilau, roast chicken, and tender rib eye steaks.

MAGNOLIAS

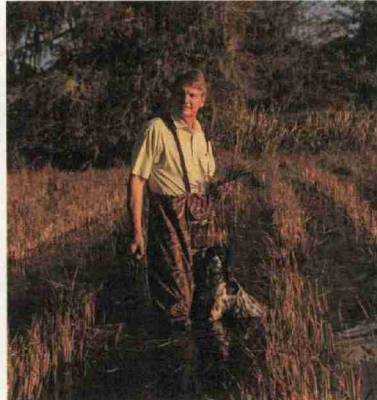
Located in Charleston's French Quarter, this airy establishment with heart-of-pine floors feels like a classic Low Country porch. Chef Kelly Franz's shrimp-based pirloo incorporates the daily catch.

THE COCKTAIL CLUB

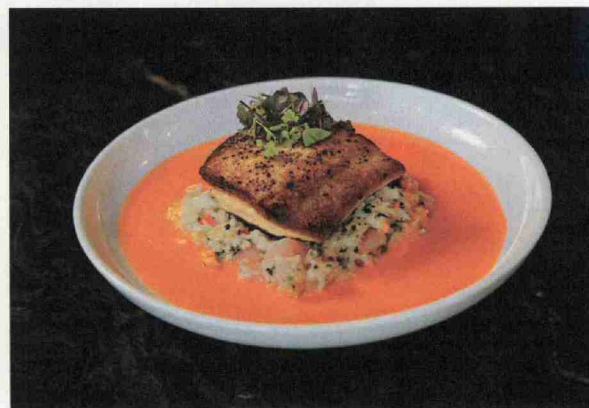
Upper King Street is a favorite place for meet-ups, and The Cocktail Club offers made-to-order punch bowls serving many people at once. Mixed with Pimm's or vodka bases, the punches are flavored with fresh limes, cucumbers, and strawberries.

BLOSSOM

The dinner menu at this East Bay Street seafood-centric restaurant serves creamy rice purloo with mahi-mahi and butter-poached shrimp. Look for southern reliables like fried chicken and blackened catfish, but don't neglect the oyster bar.



Clockwise from left: Planter Jimmy Hagood at Lavington Farms, his Low Country plantation where he grows Charleston Gold rice; the historic John Rutledge House Inn, built in 1763; parmesan-crusted flounder atop jasmine rice pirloo in a citrus beurre blanc at Magnolias; a soaking tub at the newly opened Hotel Bennett on Marion Square. Opposite page: The Bar at Husk's Light Dragon Punch, a blend of brandy, rum, and tea topped with lemon zest.



MICHAEL GEORGE (ALL PHOTOS)

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