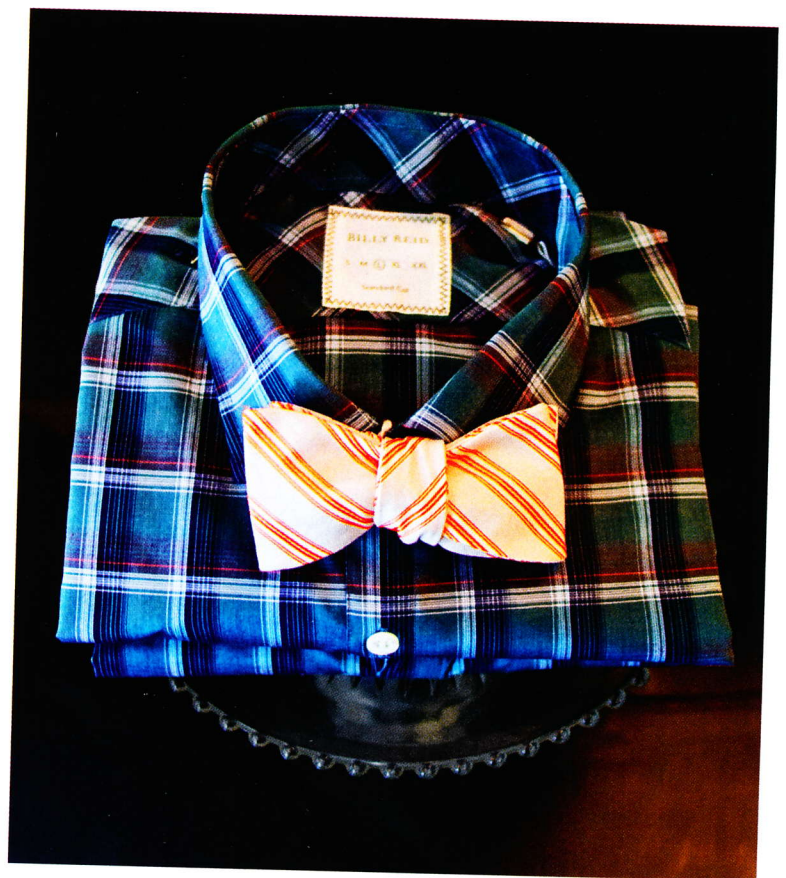




HIGH TIMES IN THE LOW COUNTRY

Why is Charleston America's favorite city?
CHRISTIAN L. WRIGHT returns to her ancestral
home to dish with the local gentry and finds
an irresistible new buzz in the air

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS



It was the spring of 1982, and I'd gone to stay with my grandmother in Charleston.

Preceding pages, from left: Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, which is open to visitors, has been in the same family since 1676. Designer Billy Reid may be from Louisiana, but his menswear—traditional Southern with a twist—suits Charleston gents to a tee. (Stock up on the look at his shop on tony King Street.)

The eclectic Southern sensibility on display at Billy Reid's shop (left) and at the Ann Long Fine Art gallery (right). Opposite: The Wentworth Mansion, a private home turned top hotel, dates back to 1886.

My new college friends had all returned home or gone to the beach somewhere for their break. For me, it was the preamble to my debut season. It's true: I'm a Charleston debutante. Strange for a person who hadn't actually lived in town since the late sixties and who found the whole notion of a debutante ball old-fashioned, conservative, and seriously uncool. I resisted as long as I could, until finally I realized that there really was no choice. Granny, a sophisticated lady who'd left a publishing career in New York—where I now live—to move back in with her mother on Meet-Street, had it all planned.

That first morning when I went down for breakfast, there were presents for me. They'd been dropped off on the front porch—flowers, playing cards from Tiffany, a small crystal pot with a silver top and a powder puff inside—as if by Santa Claus. Each had a card with a greeting in nice handwriting wishing me well in my season. That week, there were teas in my honor and cocktail parties and more presents left on the front porch. Charleston was a funny old place, still hanging on to customs that most everywhere else had been lost in the march of time. It was a throwback.

Still is. The Carolina Yacht Club accepts only men as members, and a young woman will de-

fer to an elderly man, listen to his stories, maybe flirt with him a little, where in many cities across the country this dignified old gentleman would not be given the time of day. Residents call on each other, without prior arrangement via iCal or Snapchat. You might still see a small silver tray with tiny feet on a table in the front hall that holds a collection of calling cards.

Charleston's is a story of survival. The city has suffered many blows, from the degradation of the Civil War to Hurricane Hugo, which ripped through town in 1989, clobbering a quarter of the buildings and causing more than a billion dollars' worth of damage, to the controversial *Carnival Fantasy* cruise ship idling in the heart of the city and making waves. It has endured fires, earthquakes, and upheaval, like the closing of the naval base in 1996, when 25,000 jobs were lost. Challenges that could have destroyed or at least diminished the town, as similar events have done to plenty of other small Southern enclaves, seem instead to have strengthened its resolve over and over. Charlestonians don't just live in the place; they've got it in their blood. "It's my home," said a tall lady from a prominent family, placing over her heart a delicate, age-spotted hand sporting an ancient emerald. "It's where I've always been, even when I haven't been here."

CHARLESTON SITS ON A PENINSULA SURROUNDED by barrier islands. It's often veiled by a hazy golden light that can make the cityscape—pastel two-story houses all in a row, interrupted every so often by a pointy church spire—look as if it had been painted in watercolor. At low tide, the sulfurous smell of pluff mud lingers in the air. The subtropical climate makes winters so mild that the clean-cut men in town need little more than their tweed jackets and the ladies have to wait for a cold snap to wear their furs. Summer's humid heat will melt the ice in your sweet tea faster than you can sneeze twice.

In the 1980s, many of the old families lived in genteel poverty, much as they had since the '40s, with threadbare curtains, stuffing coming out of the upholstery, and worn rugs on worn floors. Back then, Charleston was an old battle-ax, rattling around the big house with peeling paint, grumpy about the changes all around her, consoling herself with white wine. Still, she

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One of Charleston's many notable new restaurants, Butcher & Bee, on Upper King Street, specializes in "craft" sandwiches—like this roast beef with chimichurri—and a lively, casual scene (right).





knew how to throw a party, and she kept her silver polished.

"Hurricane Hugo was the real high-water mark because there were still tons of poor landed gentry, people who were living in lovely big houses but couldn't afford to paint or roof," said Anne Cleveland, executive director of the Charleston Library Society. Insurance money, she explained, created a frenzy of repair and rehabilitation. "All of a sudden, everything was in pristine condition, and more and more people started loving Charleston." Loads of them, in fact. In 2012, 4.83 million people visited Charleston, where the population is barely 125,000. In February, JetBlue began nonstop service from Boston and New York to the city's tiny airport (which is undergoing a \$162.5 million renovation). There are 1,500 new hotel rooms proposed for the peninsula. And in 2013, *Condé Nast Traveler* readers named Charleston their favorite city in the United States—for the third year in a row.

Somehow, Charleston manages to hang on to its identity in the face of the onslaught. Sure, some historic houses may have been razed to put up a Piggly Wiggly, and the distinct Charlestonian accent—*foe* not *for*, and *woont* instead of *won't*—has faded into a broader regional one. But otherwise the local character is remarkably well preserved.

Occasionally in the city's sitting rooms—some of which look lifted directly from the American Wing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—you still hear the Civil War referred to as the War of Northern Aggression. Yankees invaded the South more than 150 years ago, but it's still fresh in the Southern psyche. "We haven't gotten over secession," a dear family friend told me over fried oysters at the yacht club last win-

ter. She was laughing as she said it, but the old Charlestonian—a liberal-minded lady—wasn't kidding. Perhaps the recent surge of outsiders is just the latest assault. They may have prettied up the place, but the natives—chins held high with classic Southern dignity—won't let them erase its authenticity.

WHEN WE LIVED ON LIMEHOUSE STREET IN THE late '60s, after Sunday school we'd go to have dinner with Great-granny at her house on Meeting Street. My brother, Ben, wore a little jacket and tie, and I'd be in a Liberty-print dress with smocking and my Mary Janes. My parents, still young, were there too. We sat up straight, sipped iced tea through the straw that was part of the handle on extra-long silver spoons, and used the finger bowls as we'd been taught. Great-granny depressed a buzzer under the Oriental rug with her foot to summon Leona the maid, who would push through the swinging door from the kitchen to serve okra—a slimy green tube with strange white pellets inside—and red rice that, to me, tasted of nothing but sour tomato mixed with yesterday's rice.

Resistant to change as the locals may be, they're not complaining about the food these days. McCrady's, Sean Brock's flagship restaurant off East Bay on Unity Alley, has been transformed into a laboratory for Brock's nerdy culinary experiments, which in turn have catapulted Charleston's culinary scene onto the world stage. "In a period where we're all very inspired by the history and culture of the Lowcountry," he told me, "we're rebooting a cuisine that had disappeared."

Since Brock took over the kitchen at McCrady's in 2006, he's become a name in the company of New York darling David Chang and the poet of Copenhagen, René Redzepi, on account of his zealous commitment to Southern ingredients and his mastery of Lowcountry cooking—"the oldest cuisine in the United States," with its English, French, Mediterranean, Caribbean, and West African influences. Husk, his newer, more casual restaurant on Queen Street, which is devoted to anything grown south of the Mason-Dixon Line, was named best new restaurant in the country by *Bon Appétit* almost before the first knob of corn bread was served.

"Sometimes a place speaks to you," said Brock, a roly-poly fellow with a quick wit and a penchant for Pappy Van Winkle bourbon. A self-described hillbilly from Virginia, he first came to town to check out the cooking school. "I fell in love with Charleston on the first day. It's the architecture, the cobblestones, the attitude. This city is so proud of itself."

Brock's ascent coincided with the wave of youth—he is thirty-five—that is changing the landscape. Not just with cafés like Kudu (coffee and craft beer), restaurants like Butcher & Bee (an industrial space that serves inventive sandwiches at communal tables), and an Apple store on King Street, but with an (Continued on page 149)



1. Stopping at the bend in Church Street, one of the loveliest spots in the city's now-pristine downtown historic district. 2. Cocktails at the Gin Joint are made with homemade syrups and locally plucked herbs, and the drinks menu changes with the season.



Nicknamed the Holy City for its long history of religious tolerance—and for the dozens of church spires that pierce the low-lying cityscape—Charleston is one of the best American towns to explore on foot. St. Philip's Church, seen here, dates from 1681.

Southern Comfort

WHERE TO STAY

Charleston Place Viewed by many as the town's grande dame. Although she could use a little Bo-tox here and there, she sits right in the thick of things on King Street (843-722-4900; doubles from \$259).

John Rutledge House Inn A 250-year-old house where you can have breakfast in the parlor or coffee on the second-floor piazza, with good views over Broad Street (800-476-9741; doubles from \$260).

Planters Inn This hotel replicates the elegance of a private Charleston house, with Oriental rugs, four-poster beds, European antiques, and staff who take serious pride in their work (843-722-2345; doubles from \$239).

Wentworth Mansion Built as a private residence in 1886, the house has been renovated and repurposed with unique rooms, Tiffany stained glass, afternoon sherry, a spa in the former stables, and an area in the garden for pets (888-466-1886; doubles from \$420).

Zero George If Charleston Place is the city's grande dame, this is its blushing bride: Opened in February, the completely

overhauled hotel brings a chic boutique quality to the antebellum landscape (843-817-7900; doubles from \$349).

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Bin 152 This dignified wine bar with wainscoting and marble-topped café tables brings a hint of the Marais to the corner of King and Queen streets (152 King St.; 843-577-7359).

Butcher & Bee The open kitchen "crafts" sandwiches, but don't let that put you off. The food's very good, there's an herb garden out back, they make bread for McCrady's (below), and it's a late-night draw for chefs after their own restaurants close (654 King St.; 843-619-0202; sandwiches from \$9).

Cypress Craig Deihl, who helms the kitchen, is an artisan of cured meats as well as the latest Charleston chef to be tapped for a James Beard Award (167 E. Bay St.; 843-727-0111; entrées from \$24).

FIG This local favorite with an excellent bar handles grits, shad roe, and pig's trotters as a French chef with a thing for the American South would (232 Meeting St.;

843-805-5900; entrées from \$28).

Gin Joint A neighborhood trendsetter with a leafy patio and bartenders in bow ties who reinvent classic cocktails like whiskey slings and mint juleps (182 E. Bay St.; 843-577-6111).

The Grocery Head to this recent addition to the burgeoning Upper King neighborhood for brunch, if only to taste the bite of its outstanding Bloody Mary (4 Cannon St.; 843-302-8825; brunch dishes from \$8).

Husk From chef Sean Brock, the man behind McCrady's (below). At this, his less formal ode to Southern cooking, the menu might include cornmeal-dusted catfish from North Carolina and wood-fired clams out of McClellanville, South Carolina, from the guy everyone knows as Clammer Dave (76 Queen St.; 843-577-2500; entrées from \$27).

Kudu A coffeehouse that also has interesting beer on tap, this no-frills place gets a mix of college students, computer geeks, and well-heeled locals (4 Vanderhorst St.).

The Macintosh Chef Jeremiah Bacon worked at Le Bernardin and Per

Se in New York before returning to his native town and opening this upscale tavern (479B King St.; 843-789-4299; entrées from \$24).

McCrady's Chef Sean Brock does wonderfully imaginative things with provisions from local farmers, many of them named on the menu (2 Unity Alley; 843-577-0025; entrées from \$27).

The Ordinary Chef Mike Lata and co-owner Adam Nemirow, the team behind FIG, renovated an old bank to house their new oyster bar, where roasted snapper, schnitzel, and fish-and-chips are served on large plates intended to be shared. "If you want to taste Charleston, what better way than an oyster?" says Lata. "They're very different, very salty, and very clean" (544 King St.; 843-414-7060; large plates from \$25).

Two Boroughs Larder With rough-hewn wood, rickety tables, unusual small plates like brussels sprouts with salumi vinaigrette, and a grocery (er, larder) in front, this relative newcomer brings a little Brooklyn to the Holy City (186 Coming St.; 843-637-3722; entrées from \$20).

—C.L.W.