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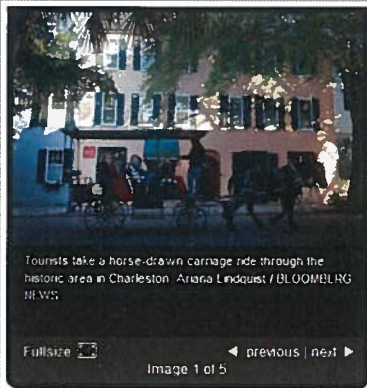
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SOUTH CAROLINA

## Quick trips: Culinary adventures in Charleston

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### GOING TO CHARLESTON

Getting there: American Airlines flies nonstop from Miami to Charleston in an hour and 40 minutes. There are no nonstops from Fort Lauderdale, but US Airways and Delta will get you there from either city in less than four hours with a connecting flight. Roundtrip airfare starts at \$470 for a nonstop flight from Miami, \$382 for a connecting flight, \$460 from Fort Lauderdale.

Information: charlestoncvb.com

### WHERE TO STAY

Hotels in Charleston's historic district are typically pricey. I've had good luck using Priceline or Hotwire and expanding my search to hotels near the airport (North Charleston). I've ended up at the Radisson and the InnPlace (a former Sheraton) at prices considerably below downtown rates.

**Belmond Charleston Place Hotel:** 205 Meeting St.; 843-722-4900, [charlestonplace.com](http://charlestonplace.com). An elegant hotel with rooftop pool, health club and concierge floor, located in the heart of the historic district, a short walk from City Market. Rooms from \$297.

**Charleston Harbor Resort & Marina:** 20 Patriots Point Rd.; 888-856-0028; [www.charlestonharborresort.com](http://www.charlestonharborresort.com). Just across the Arthur Ravenel Bridge in Mt. Pleasant, the hotel offers 125 rooms, a free trolley to downtown Charles, pool, activities for kids. Rooms from \$229.

### WHERE TO EAT

**FIG (Food is Good):** 232 Meeting St. 843-805-5900, [eatatfig.com](http://eatatfig.com). Contemporary cuisine with Southern roots, made with seasonal ingredients from the Low Country. Chef Mike Lata is a James Beard Best Chef Southeast winner. Dinner only. Entrees \$28-\$40.

**Gullah Cuisine:** 1717 U.S. 17, Mt. Pleasant, 843-881-9076, [gullahcuisine.net](http://gullahcuisine.net). The cuisine of African-Americans, many of them descendants of slaves living in isolated pockets of coastal Georgia and South Carolina. The menu includes such traditional dishes as sweet potato fritters, fried alligator, okra gumbo, fried chicken and smothered pork chops. Lunch-dinner, entrees \$12.95-\$22.95.

**Hominy Grill:** 207 Rutledge Ave.; 843-937-0930, [hominygrill.com](http://hominygrill.com). Breakfast, lunch, dinner. Charleston classics including she-crab soup, shrimp and grits, Country Captain chicken, fried catfish po' boy. Entrees \$6-\$19.

**Husk:** 76 Queen St.; 843-577-2500, [HuskRestaurant.com](http://HuskRestaurant.com). Southern cooking, updated, with strictly local ingredients, an artisanal mind-set and a menu that changes daily. Bon Appetit named it best new U.S. restaurant in 2011. Another Sean Brock restaurant (see McCrady's, below). Husk is more casual and focused on bringing back heirloom ingredients. Lunch and dinner, entrees \$27-\$30.

**Jestine's Kitchen:** 251 Meeting St., 843-722-7224, [jestineskitchen.com](http://jestineskitchen.com). Lunch-dinner, traditional Southern food including oyster po'boys, meatloaf, fried chicken and

BY MARJIE LAMBERT

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I'm sitting at the bar at FIG restaurant in Charleston, talking with the strangers on either side of me about what we're doing tonight at the Spoleto Festival — I'm going to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed with puppets, the couple on my left is seeing a program of bawdy songs, the folks on my right are going to an unspecified concert — when my soup arrives.

The menu describes the soup as spring onion soubise with pistou and a crouton. I don't know what soubise is, but the bartender, who knows more about food than a roomful of bartenders anywhere else, has already cautioned me it's nothing like traditional French onion soup.

I taste a spoonful and close my eyes. It's amazing. It's creamy but light, the flavor of early green onions is slightly sweet but intense, and there's a narrow ribbon of pesto stirred in. It may be the best soup I've ever had.

Another woman at the bar orders the soup, then says to me that she did so "because of the look on your face when you took your first taste of it."

I'm convinced that tonight, I have the best seat in town for eating. I couldn't get reservations for FIG (Food is Good), but friends said the trick is to arrive right when the restaurant opens and ask for a seat at the bar, which I did. So, apparently, did my new friends. No one is here just for a beer or a martini, they all have plates of food in front of them and are getting wine-pairing advice from the bartender.

Charleston is small — population about 125,000 — but it's one of America's great cities for travelers. Readers of *Condé Nast Traveler* have voted it the No. 1 city in the country three years in a row, and *Travel + Leisure* named it the best U.S. city for tourists last year.

Likewise its restaurants and chefs are regularly honored. In the last five years, for example, two of its chefs have received James Beard Best Chef Southeast awards, and *Bon Appetit* named Husk best new U.S. restaurant in 2011.

Charleston sits at the confluence of two rivers, the Ashley and the Cooper. The rivers and the city harbor have played a crucial role since Charleston was settled as a colony, making it a center of the slave trade, its rich soil farmed, its waters yielding a treasure of seafood. Here, you can tour old warships and a modern aquarium or visit Fort Sumter, where the first shots of the Civil War were fired.

Downtown Charleston still puts history on stage as well. Some of Church Street's congregations date to the late 1600s, its oldest church buildings to the early 1700s. The old slave market is now a museum that tells the story of Charleston's role in the slave trade. The City Market, which dates to the early 1800s, sells local food products and sweetgrass baskets woven on the spot, as well as all manner of jewelry, clothing and crafts.

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fried pork chops and sides including collard greens, fried okra. Sandwiches and baskets \$5.95-\$9.95, plates (meat + 2 sides) \$9.95-\$15.95.

**Magnolia's:** 185 E. Bay St. 843-577-7771; [magnolias-blossom-cypress.com](http://magnolias-blossom-cypress.com) At age 24, one of the doyennes of Charleston's restaurants. Upscale Southern cooking that's been lightly updated (ahi tuna with a sweet chili rub pan-roasted duck breast with feta cheese and smoked bacon dressing) but is still close to its roots (pimento cheese, fried green tomatoes with cheese grits and tomato chutney, buttermilk fried chicken). Lunch and dinner plus Sunday brunch. entrees \$19-\$32.

**McCrary's:** 2 Unity Alley; 843-577-0025; [mccrarysrestaurant.com](http://mccrarysrestaurant.com) Inventive Southern cuisine, creative use of unusual produce, animal parts and fresh herbs from the rooftop garden by owner and chef Sean Brock (2010 James Beard Best Chef Southeast). Dinner only, four-course dinner \$65, nine-course dinner \$110.

**SNOB** (Slightly North of Broad): 192 E. Bay St.; 843-723-3424

[mavenkitchen.com](http://mavenkitchen.com) or [slightlynorthofbroad.com](http://slightlynorthofbroad.com) Upscale Low Country cuisine that still has the classics in sight, from shrimp and grits to pan-seared duck breast. Local ingredients and a love of produce. Entrees \$18-\$34.

#### WHAT TO DO

**Taste of Charleston:** Sept. 26-28 at Boone Hall Plantation in Mt. Pleasant. [charlestonrestaurantassociation.com/taste-of-charleston](http://charlestonrestaurantassociation.com/taste-of-charleston)

**Charleston Culinary Tours:** 843-259-2966 [www.charlestonculinarytours.com](http://www.charlestonculinarytours.com) The 2 1/2 hour Chefs Kitchen Tour is given twice a week, \$50. This company offers a variety of other tours related to food and drink.

**Charleston Cooks:** 194 E. Bay St. 843-722-1212. [charlestoncooks.com](http://charlestoncooks.com) Offers both demonstration and participation classes, starting at \$25 for a "Taste of the Lowcountry" demonstration class to \$395 for four four-hour "cooking camp" sessions.

**Charles Towne Pub Stroll** is offered through [charlestonpiralietour.com](http://charlestonpiralietour.com); 843-442-7299; \$20.

**Spoleto Festival USA:** 17-day festival May 23 to June 8 offers opera, music theatre, dance and special events. [spoletousa.org/](http://spoletousa.org/)

Every spring, Charleston hosts Spoleto Festival USA around Memorial Day (May 23 to June 8 this year), about 150 performances of theater, opera, dance and music with performers of national and international renown. A companion festival, Spoleto Piccolo, features performances by local and regional artists.

But for me and for many others, the food is the draw. On this particular trip in May 2013, the timing of Spoleto was a happy coincidence.

I visited Charleston four times in two years, sampling the cuisine any way I could. I went to a food festival, went on three walking tours related to food and drink, took a cooking class and ate at restaurants recommended for their emphasis on local ingredients, techniques and cuisine. It's a moving target, though, and my Charleston wish list is never quite completed.

#### FOOD FESTIVAL

With a fistful of tickets in my hand, I survey my choices: pulled pork sliders, ricotta gnocchi with sweet corn and country ham, fish tacos, jambalaya, truffled mac and cheese, salmon tartare with smoked trout mousse and grilled crostini, shrimp and grits, pimento cheese in various forms. And I haven't even gotten to the dessert offerings. This is my idea of heaven. A Taste of Charleston fall festival, with local restaurants selling samples of their dishes, most of them \$2-\$6 for a small plate.

A Taste of Charleston is held every fall (Sept. 26-28 this year) at Boone Hall Plantation, a culinary landmark in its own right. The plantation, which has been in existence more than 250 years, is still a working farm in the suburb of Mt. Pleasant. We park on the far reaches of the property, where the

tomato and squash plants are still producing in late September, and walk in past the historic slave quarters, the Gullah Theater, the alley of arcing oak trees that are more than 200 years old.

Booth after booth offer small servings of two or three dishes. Plus there is a beer garden and wine from the Billmore Estate in Asheville, N.C. So much temptation! Far more dishes appeal to me than I could possibly eat.

I buy a tiny cup of she-crab soup and a serving of grits sticks — cooked grits mixed with that old Southern favorite, pimento cheese, shaped into sticks, deep-fried and served with a sweet-hot sauce. Then I find a place to sit on the lawn and listen to the live music.

On my next round I sample fried pimento-cheese ravioli and an excellent bruschetta with spicy grilled shrimp. The ravioli was then topped with peach-bacon marmalade. The dish is savory-sweet and almost could pass for dessert.

I buy one more taste, a pumpkin cobbler dessert, and waddle to my car.

#### BEER & HISTORY

Our tour starts in a public square in Charleston, tagging along after a fellow dressed in pirate get-up. At our first stop, a pub in a historic building, we order brews — I have a White Thai, a local Belgian-inspired beer made with lemongrass and ginger root. We drink out back in the courtyard, in the ruins of an old bank vault, as the pirate tells us about the history of the Blind Tiger Pub and the state Prohibition-type laws that gave the pub its name.

We're on a walking tour of Charleston's historic pubs. In one of North America's oldest cities — and a port city at that — even the taverns have colonial-era histories.

At our next stop, we hear a tale about a pirate, Anne Bonny, who set sail from Charlestown disguised as a man, and at the next, about the man who hanged himself on the third floor of the building. Then we go up to the third-floor bar. Whaddya mean, his ghost never left the building? Did that chair just move on its own?

Our pirate-guide, Mike Coker, knows his local history — he has written a couple books on Charleston — and is quite entertaining.

Unless you've been in training, four hearty beers plus pub food is plenty to consume in 3 1/2 hours. Don't kid yourself that you can walk it all off that night. But the tales are calorie-free.

#### LOW COUNTRY CUISINE

I did two other food tours on different trips to Charleston, including a tour of restaurant kitchens, where we talked to chefs about what went on behind the scenes. Our tour guide, Hoon Calhoun, a Charleston native and serious foodie, he wove it all into a tapestry for us.

Between stops (and later in a phone interview) he talked about the Charleston style of entertaining that goes back to wealthy English settlers in colonial times, the lavish spreads made with local ingredients, the talented slave-cooks who sometimes spent time on other plantations so they could learn new specialties, the rice-growing plantations that thrived under slavery and turned riverfront landowners into wealthy men, the grinding of corn into grits, how the slow roasting of pork — the staple meat of settlers — evolved into modern barbecue (and pulled pork sandwiches).

Centuries later, today's interest in fresh, local produce, meat and seafood takes us back to traditions of the colonial table, he says. My own experiences here tell me that Charleston celebrates its culinary history on the scale of larger cities like San Francisco or New Orleans.

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QUICK JOB SEARCH

I also take a class at Charleston Cooks! a kitchen store. We watch two people cook blackened fish, "pirfau" a creamy pilaf-like dish made with Carolina Gold rice and local squash, and apple cobbler, as one of them explains Low Country cuisine and the contributions of various cultures

But the heart of my research is eating. I look for restaurants that are distinctively Charlestonian/Low Country or at least Southern. No chains, no Italian or Mexican or Thai restaurants, no steakhouses or burger joints

My meals are a mix of my favorites of the classics — oyster po'boys, she-crab soup, shrimp and grits — and-of-the-moment takes on Low Country cooking

One night I eat seared scallops with grapefruit and avocado at Anson's (currently closed after a fire did extensive damage) and thought it was the best scallop dish I'd ever had, until the next night at McCrady's when it was surpassed by grilled clams and scallops on grilled cucumber sprinkled with basil seeds plumped up in cucumber juice, baby herbs on top, with popcorn miso on the side

McCrady's has a rooftop herb garden, and on both occasions that I eat there, I think the chef has gone overboard with the herbs. I brush off some of the green when the food feels a bit weedy. McCrady's has the most inventive kitchen of any of the places I eat, but the wine list may be what I like best, about 35 wines by the glass AND half-glass (3-ounce pours) so I can choose a different wine for each of the four courses without over-imbibing

Husk, like McCrady's, is a Sean Brock restaurant, and has neither salt nor pepper on the table. The food, you are given to understand, is already perfectly seasoned

For lunch at Husk, I eat feather-light yeast rolls with sesame seeds and sea salt smoked in bourbon barrels, spread with butter mixed with honey and rendered pork, while I'm waiting for my catfish BLT. The sandwich comes with a small green salad, and the waiter mentions that the Bibb lettuce and tomato came from a farm on nearby Johns Island just that morning

I have no reservations when I stop at S N O B (Slightly North of Broad) another day for a late lunch and get the only seat available — at the bar. I eat shrimp and grits made spicy by andouille sausage. My seatmates are friendly and slightly rowdy, and lunch has the feel of an impromptu party even before someone buys me a shot of tequila. I'm starting to like this eat-at-the-bar business

So much to savor! But the high point was dinner at the bar at FIG, with a main course of grouper poached in olive oil and served over finely julienned squash and bell peppers with pesto, a nice selection of wines by the glass, and the camaraderie of people with the same passion for good food and drink

Curtain time for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is approaching, so I climb off my stool, say farewell to my seatmates and the savvy bartender, and walk to the theater. It's my last night in town, and already I've heard about another must-do restaurant. It will go to the top of my to-do list for my next culinary adventure in Charleston

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