Quick trips: Culinary adventures in Charleston

BY MARIE LAMBERT
MLAMBERT@MIAMIHERALD.COM

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 baroque songs. The folks on my right are going to an unspecified concert — when my soup arrives.

The menu describes the soup as spring onion soup with pipi 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 can'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 a 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 eat old world hospitality and a modern aquarium or visit Fort Sumter where the first shots of the Civil War were fired.

Down town 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.
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折叠 of tickets in hand, I surveyed my choices pulled pork sliders, nectarine 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-$5 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 suburbs 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 arched fruit 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 Biltmore 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 tasso 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 historic版本 of White, I order a beer — I have a white apron on — and they bring out a very cold beer made with lemon peel and ginger root. We drink our back out 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 — 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 Charleston disguised as a man, and at the next stop, 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 Coler, 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 at that speed. 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 Khothn, 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 freeright 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.
I also take a class at Charleston Cooks!, a kitchen store. We watch two people cook blackened fish "primus," a creamy pasta-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 distinctly 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 camas and scallops on grilled cucumber sprinkled with basil seeds slumped up in cucumber juice, baby herbs on top, with popcorn miro 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 30 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 H 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 savour! But the high point was dinner 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. I'll try to go to the top of my to-do list for my next culinary adventure in Charleston.