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THE SOUTH'S BEST NEW RESTAURANTS

SEPTEMBER 2013

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Southern
TRAVEL+ CULTURE

YOUR LOCAL'S GUIDE TO ALL POINTS SOUTH

**THE
SOUTH'S
BEST**

**BAKED
OYSTERS**
from The
Ordinary

**NEW
RESTAURANTS**

*Southern food has never been better. Here's where
Travel & Features Editor Jennifer V. Cole says you
should eat your next unforgettable meal*



A Live More Ordinary
CLOCKWISE: the dining room at The Ordinary in Charleston, South Carolina; a shellfish tower from the raw bar; chef and co-owner Mike Lata



the taste of seafood, much like the word “terroir” is used to describe variances in winemakers’ harvests.

And at **The Ordinary**, Mike’s high temple of Neptune’s bounty on Upper King Street, “merroir” rules the menu. As he bounces around the see-and-be-seen two-story dining room, always the welcoming host, an earnestness befalls his twinkling smile when he describes the Capers Blade oysters harvested by “Clammer Dave” Belanger that day. Or the triggerfish, cooked schnitzel-style with a fine-crumb coating, caught by fisherman Mark Marhefka.

When Mike first opened Charleston’s FIG with partner Adam Nemirow 10 years ago, his vegetable plate unwittingly overshadowed everything else on the menu. He made

veggies with pedigree chic. Now you see farmers’ names sprinkled across menus throughout the country, and Mike has turned his attention to the fruits of the sea. I’m convinced his efforts will inspire kitchens well beyond the Lowcountry. You’re destined to know your crabber by name in the coming years.

MORE SEAFOOD STANDOUTS

At **The Optimist** (theoptimistrestaurant.com), Ford Fry’s greatest culinary contribution to Atlanta, it’s a fish lover’s smorgasbord. Get the Georgia white shrimp *a la plancha* with arbol chile and lime. In New Orleans, Donald Link, Ryan Prewitt, and Stephen Stryjewski recently revealed **Pêche Seafood Grill** (pecherestaurant.com), an open-fire emporium inspired by a trip to Uruguay. Don’t miss the smothered cast-iron catfish, a riff on a Cajun classic.

I’VE EATEN MY WAY AROUND the world, but these days there’s absolutely no place on Earth I’d rather dine than the South. Over the past decade I’ve taken chances on dodgy food stalls in southeast Asia (that were totally worth it) and made pilgrimages to Michelin three-star shrines across Europe (that didn’t always merit a mortgage payment-size tab). This year alone, I’ve logged roughly 31,000 miles—from Charleston to Miami to Houston—all in the name of sussing out the best food. (Trust me when I tell you that the South has never been hotter.) It’s a dream job...until you’re asked to narrow down—and rank!—your top five favorites. I spent the last few months obsessing over the restaurants listed on these pages. The modern landscape of Southern food is varied and wildly diverse like never before. And in this inaugural celebration of restaurants across the region, I’ve chosen to salute a crop of newcomers that collectively reflects what Southern food is today and where it’s going. From seafood palaces that champion the bounty of our waters (mark my word: fishermen will be the culinary rock stars of 2014) to simple neighborhood joints and kitchens run by first-generation Southerners who are introducing kimchi to our collards and curry leaves to our fried chicken, these picks reveal the patchwork quilt of modern Southern food. And they demonstrate why *now* is the best time to dine out down South.

No. **1**

THE ORDINARY
CHARLESTON, SC

Because the bounty of our waters is the next big thing

For chef Mike Lata, the term “merroir” is as much a part of his lexicon as “knife.” He uses it to refer to the impact that waters of a specific place have on



Oyster Sliders

The perfect spicy-sweet, crispy, tender combo: Fried oysters are tucked inside Hawaiian rolls and topped with cabbage, pickled carrots, homemade Sriracha hot sauce, cilantro, and jalapeños (\$5).