





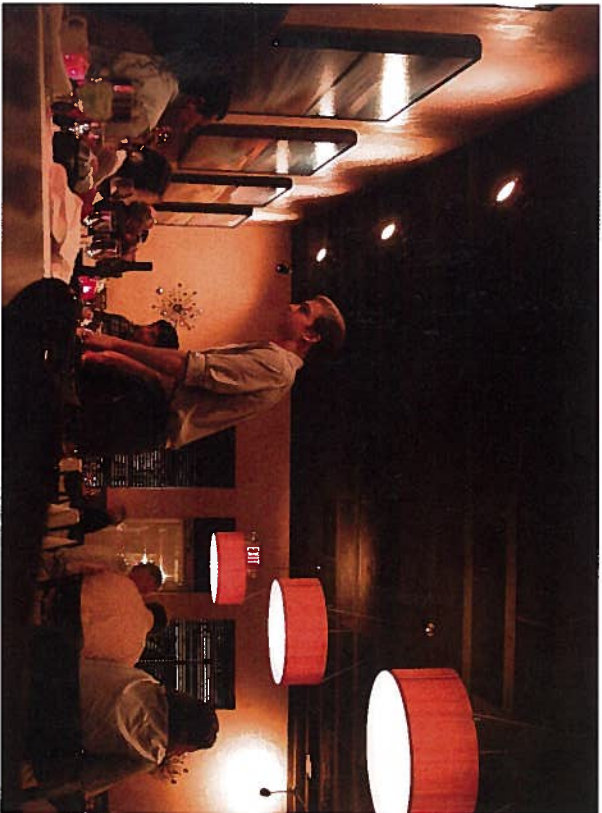


# CHEAPRIESTON

*Taste Like no other city*

by JIM MORRISON  
photography by KEITH LANPHER





It's Friday night at the modestly named FIG (Food is Good) on Meeting Street at the edge of downtown Charleston and every table is buzzing – and will be buzzing well into the night, with empty seats quickly yielding to new diners. Five girls raise their cocktails to toast one another near the center of the room. Along one wall, a couple debate wine choices from a deep and diverse list. Opposite them, three guys tell tales.

When it opened nine years ago, FIG became part of the first wave of restaurants transforming Charleston into a foodie fantasyland. The city has more than three centuries of rich history and lovingly preserved architecture in a remarkable number of styles from Colonial to Victorian. English colonists, among the wealthiest of their time, laid out the young burg in a series of elegant boulevards and narrow side streets. Walking through downtown Charleston after dark with its sidewalk tables, mixture of art galleries and specialty shopping, old churches and trendy bars softly lit by gas lamps or incandescent lights is as close to strolling an old European city center as you'll find this side of the pond.

But food now rivals history and architecture as the city's signature charm – and attraction to visitors.

Four million people visit annually. Last fall, *Condé Nast Traveler* readers named Charleston the top U.S. travel destination. *Outside* magazine listed it as the fifth best place to live. The 2012 PGA Championship will be held in August just down the road on Kiawah Island. The Spoleto Festival, from May 25 to June 10, is one of the spring's signature arts events.

"It's a very sophisticated city in an unpretentious way," says Mike Lata, the chef/owner at FIG who won a James Beard Award in 2009 (one of three in recent years from a city of 105,000). "Our customers eat whatever we want to serve and drink whatever we want to pour them. They're ordering five items off the menu and sharing every one of them. The common thread is they want to have a great experience."

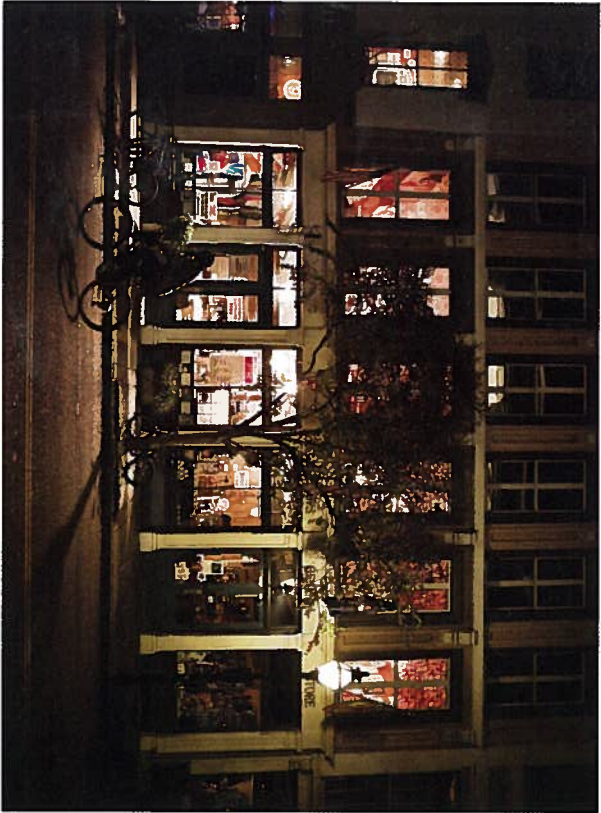
My long weekend wandering through Charleston is punctuated by a Triple Crown of meals at three of the finest restaurants in town – indeed, three of the finest anywhere.

In a way, the culinary culture is following the lead of the preservationists, who built a local economy based upon making Charleston a historical neverland. They took the best local natural resources – great architecture and an old city perfect for pedestrians – and highlighted them, telling their stories with enticing narratives. And they served it with a charm that's somehow both Old World and Old South.

About the time Lata and others began looking for quality local ingredients, a number of purveyors in the area began resurrecting heirloom varieties of ingredients like corn, tomatoes, pigs and even native oysters. It's a foodie's virtuous circle: The farms exist because of the chefs, the chefs prosper thanks to the farms.

At FIG, the menu changes daily, offering the best from nearby waters and farms, a culinary high-wire act Lata has performed for more than a decade. When FIG features stone crabs, the woman who catches them calls daily to see how many pounds it needs. When it's soft shell crab season, she delivers them as soon as they've shed in holding tanks nearby.

The story of those local gems begins with the cocktail offerings – five pages of them – serving notice that you're embarking on an adventure. I eye the mix-and-match Manhattan menu. My server, Samantha, a foodie who moved to town 20 years ago, suggests Basil Hayden's bourbon with Dolin Rouge vermouth and Fee Brothers Aztec Chocolate bitters. I've been on Kentucky's bourbon trail, and while Basil Hayden's is nice, it's not my first or second choice for sipping. I'm also unsure about the chocolate bitters, but I've learned to trust the locals while traveling on foreign soil. Smart move. The drink is as complex as





advertised, intriguing, not cloying.

My main dish is local grilled gray triggerfish, once treated as a bycatch by shrimpers, with sauce romesco, sauteed young greens and bagna cauda. The fish is succulent, highlighted by an incredibly silky, light sauce.

The centerpiece of my meal is the appetizer, a coddled Sea Island farm egg with beech mushrooms braised in red wine and bacon, celeriac cream and parmesan crouton. It's a deep treasure of flavors, the earthy mushrooms, the salty parmesan and the silky, creamy super-fresh egg with a yolk so sunny it should have its own Crayola color. The egg is laid on nearby Wadmalaw Island by chickens free to roam their pasture, feeding on grass and bugs.

When I ask him about it later, Lata says the idea was to take a high-quality local ingredient and create a memorable dish. "We said what's going to tug at the heartstrings of customers is when they have a surprise, when they have something and don't know how it's made and that elevates it, gives it a celebratory feel," he says. "There's harmony there. There's intellectual value. There's something they'll remember."

There's also passion, ambition and an attention to detail I find throughout Charleston, whether it's at the restaurant table, in the bricks and mortar of one gracious mansion after another, or the telling – and selling – of the city's considerable history.

**Saturday morning, the light streams through** the old hay loft at 21 East Battery, the bed and breakfast part of the 1825 Edmondston-Alston House. I'm staying in the carriage house at the rear. Charles Duell – whose family in 1838 purchased this house and Middleton Place, a plantation up the Ashley River – lives on the third floor of the mansion with his wife. The bottom floors are open to the public as a museum.

Rather than break up the carriage house into rooms, he kept the original walls, adding only a staircase to replace the ladder to the second-floor loft. The result is an expansive space with brick walls in the second-floor sitting area and wood beams in the master bedroom. The first floor has a small kitchen and a living room with a grand piano. Breakfast this morning is a crustless spinach and cheese quiche and banana nut bread, both made by Julie Lucas, the caretaker.

While Charleston's Colonial wealth built treasures like this, Duell says the city's poverty in the decades after the Civil War helped preserve them; there was no money to tear down old buildings for something newer and "better."

The lower peninsula that is downtown Charleston has a west side that is

quietly residential and an east side that caters to visitors. 21 East Battery has the advantage of being just on the residential side so it's quiet, but within easy walking distance of the shops, bars and restaurants.

It's an unseasonably warm morning as I walk north along East Bay. People are already out, enjoying brunch, browsing the galleries. Horse-drawn carriages, their drivers often standing to tell tales of this house or that church, saunter along the narrow street.

I meet Joyce Aungst in Washington Square Park near the corner of Broad and Meeting streets. Aungst moved to Charleston a decade ago after 25 years living in San Francisco and is an unabashed ambassador. Seven years ago, she opened Charleston History

Photo Tours.

We stroll out of the park to the first vantage, the city's "four corners of law" at Broad and Meeting, a term coined by Robert Ripley of Ripley's Believe It Or Not in 1930 because the seats of local, state, federal and religious law were built here. On the southeast corner is Saint Michael's Episcopal Church, constructed between 1752 and 1761. To the north is Charleston City Hall, built between 1800 and 1804; on the northwest corner is the Charleston County Courthouse, built in 1753; and on the southwest corner is the federal courthouse, where one of the cases that would become Brown vs. Board of Education – and the landmark Supreme Court desegregation ruling – originated.

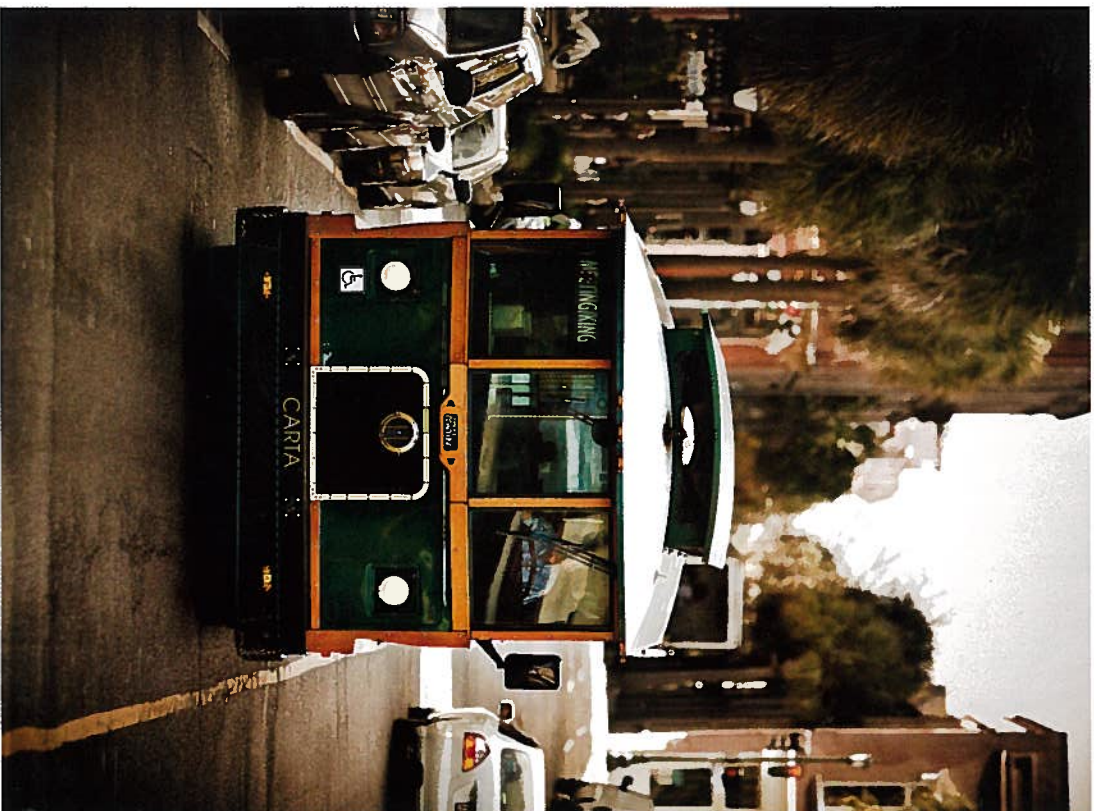
Aungst shows me an angle from the steps of City Hall using a palm tree and a street lamp in the foreground to frame the courthouse. Again and again, on our two-hour walk, she'll show one angle after another, offering suggestions for composition.

Around every corner, down every narrow thoroughfare, there's another story. On Tradd Street, Aungst says there are 22 homes that were standing

when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Down another street is the house of Dubose Heyward, who wrote a story fashioned after a local character named Porgy, a story George Gershwin set to music and turned into a play that endures nearly 80 years later. Down on The Battery, antebellum mansions line the water with distant views of Fort Sumter, where the Civil War began.

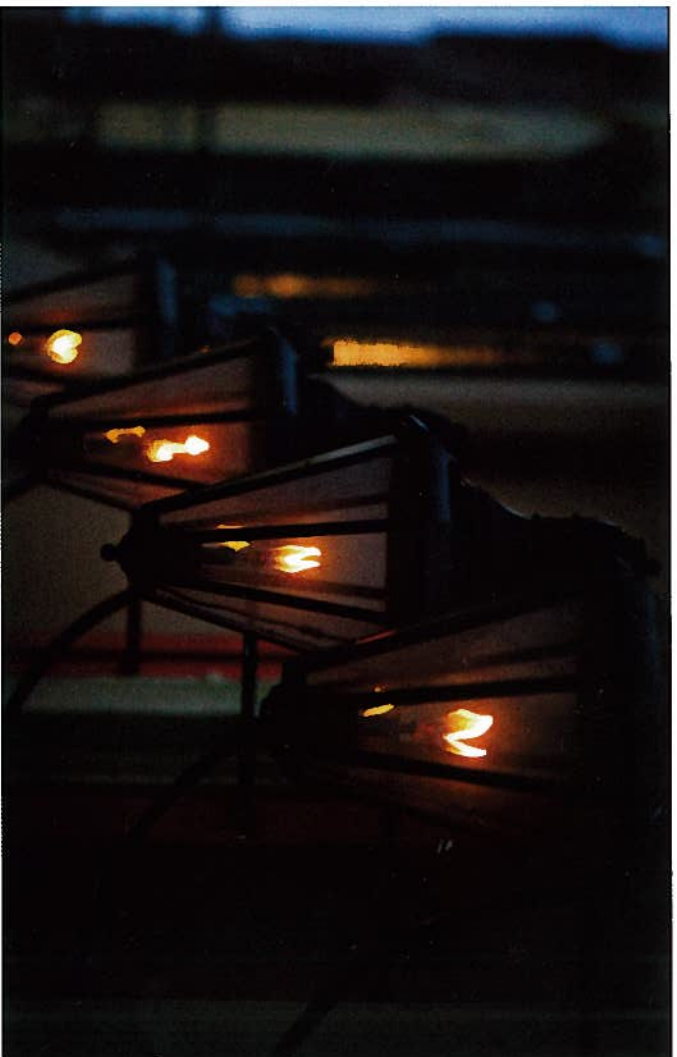
After lunch at Fleet Landing, an old concrete Navy building on the Cooper River with great views, it's a short walk to enter City Market, four blocks of low-slung brick buildings with dozens of vendors selling jewelry, photography, T-shirts, pottery, food and used vinyl. It's a city-sanctioned, somewhat upscale, flea market.

Dotted throughout are the makers and sellers of sweetgrass baskets,





Few things can evoke the more luscious aspects of history better than lamplight at night and the sound of horseshoes on the street. Revel in it at Gaultart & Malcliet – Fast and French – on Broad Street.



Glance up and there's yet more food. Near right, looking toward FIG from Sticky Fingers Smokehouse, on Meeting Street. Center: Hanks is neighbor to the horse on the previous page. Far right, the chicken liver pâté at FIG.



The Battery promenade is one favorite destination on the waterfront. Cannons and cannonballs, mansions, oaks and palmettos, statuary and views. Did we say mansions? At right, East Bay Street is home to some. Diners, center, at Circa 1886, in the former carriage house behind the Wentworth Mansion.



More of Keith Lanpher's take on Charleston at [DistinctionHR.com](http://DistinctionHR.com)







a Charleston tradition for three centuries. They've become symbolic of the Gullah, people with their own language and well-preserved customs, who first came to the area as slaves largely from West Africa. Before the cotton gin, South Carolina was rice country and the baskets served as tools in the fields as well as on the farm. Like so many folk art traditions, sweetgrass basket making nearly died out in the early 20th century before the demand from gift shops, museums and collectors revived interest. Now, the baskets sell for \$25 to \$1,800, depending upon their size and intricacy, to tourists and collectors.

From the market, I head north on Meeting Street, spending the early afternoon browsing the Charleston Museum, founded in 1773. It has a nice combination of natural and cultural history including exhibits on the Civil War, the Revolution, the Lowcountry and a few prehistoric skeletons.

## “ Charleston is a drinking town with a history problem.”

Then it's west to King Street and a change of pace. King is shopping central in Charleston. I start on the upper, northern, end where there's a newly designated design district and funky offerings favored by the locals. East Bay is where most tourists congregate; Upper King is where locals go. I pass the Butterfly Women's Consignment Shop, the tempting Cupcake, and Blue Bicycle Books, an enticing store of used (and new) books. Lower on King, sidewalk traffic increases, as do the rents. Once known as the antique district, now it's a mix of upscale national retailers including Urban Outfitters, Ralph Lauren, Brooks Brothers and Nine West as well as a plethora of high-end local stores like Ben Silver, the longtime clothier, The Silver Vault, which has original jewelry and silverware, and the Rebekah Jacob Gallery, which features the landscape photographs of Michael Kenna.

I spend the late afternoon on a shady bench in Battery Park at the base of King Street, an antidote to a day of consuming—food, history and shopping. But soon it's back to the table because no one leaves Charleston hungry.

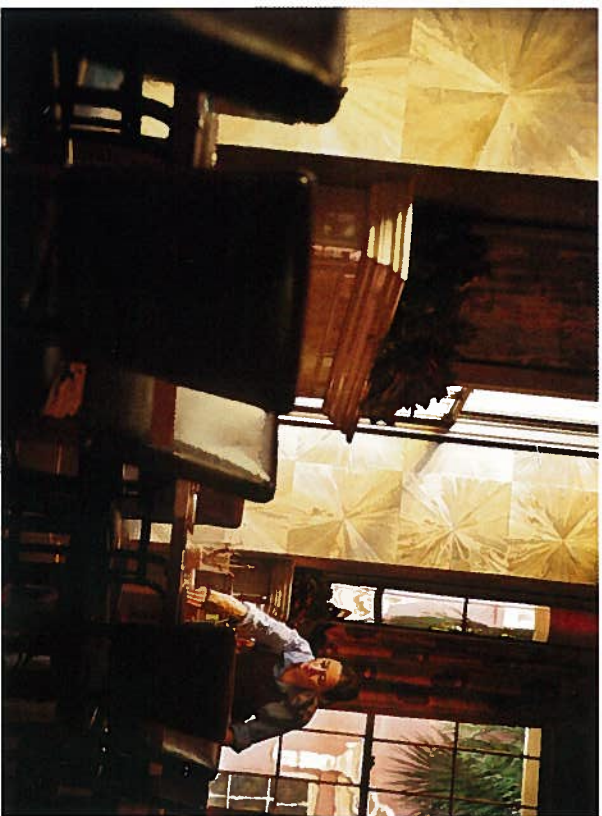
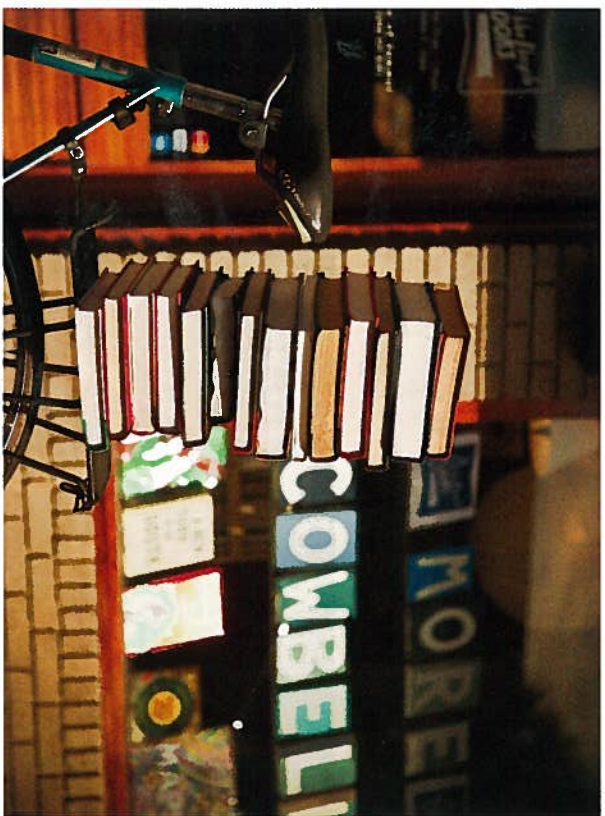
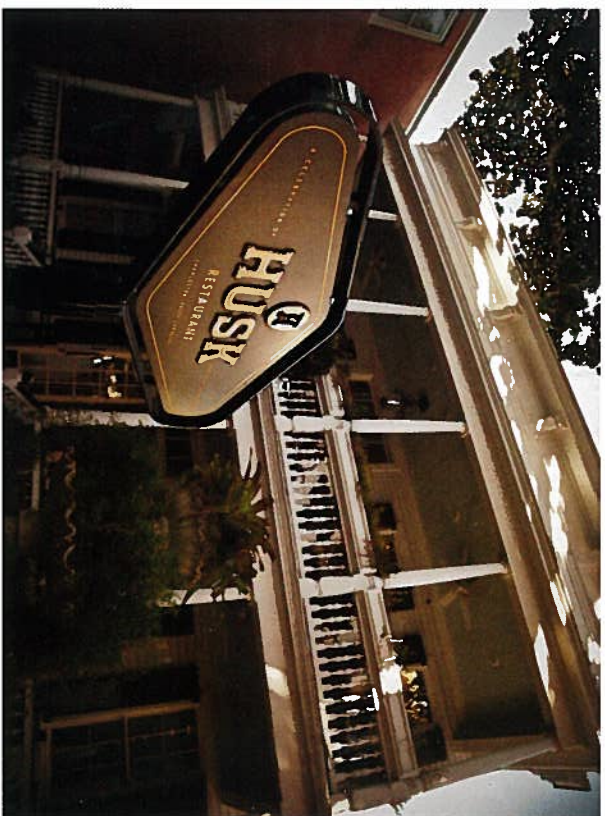
The second jewel in my dining Triple Crown for the weekend is Circa 1886, in the former carriage house behind the Wentworth Mansion, an oasis in the middle of a residential neighborhood about a 25-minute walk from my lodging. The mansion was built in 1885 and the dining room is Old World with white tablecloths, dim lighting and booths along the wall. Every table is occupied by a couple; this is a special date destination. The ambience is more formal, less adventuresome, and so is the menu. The centerpiece of the three courses—between the satisfying smoked veal ton tonro and the wondrous warm, melt-in-your mouth texture of the blueberry preserves soufflé—is the antelope loin. It arrives rare, as requested, and is sweet and tender with a bit of whipped brie and Burgundy braised vegetables.

Afterward I meander down Market Street and into Mercato, an Italian-American restaurant that's featuring a local jazz trio, who provide the soundtrack for a glass of Italian red. With a seat at the long bar, it's tempting to stay until closing, but there's another establishment that showcases Charleston's ambitious



ABOVE: The Charleston City Market had its origins in a bequest to the city in 1788. Perhaps the local roots of the tomato pie and sweet potato cornbread at Dixie Supply go almost as far back. In Folly Beach, across the bridge from The Battery and East Bay there's Taco Boy.





ABOVE: Husk on Queen Street, was named the best restaurant of 2011 by *Bon Appetit*. Only Southern ingredients have the sanction of chef Sean Brock. On King, the shopping mecca, readers head to Blue Bicycle Books. Bottom, preparing for dinner at Husk.

passion for food and drink that I want to try.

Back on bustling East Bay, I wander into the Gin Joint, a locals' favorite that proves as promising as its name. The place, with a center long butcher block table and booths, is packed, but I get the last seat at the tiny bar. "Charleston is a drinking town with a history problem," Joyce Aungst had told me during our morning tour.

In seconds, it's obvious the two guys behind the bar in vests and bowties are artists. They crack their own ice and fire up a blowtorch occasionally to make an array of cocktails with names like The Original New Orleans Fizz and Penicillin. My choice is the Connecticut Shade Manhattan, Woodford Reserve bourbon infused for 10 days with fresh shade-grown tobacco leaves to give the classic cocktail a deep, earthy taste. It's the definition of a Saturday nightcap.

**My last, laid-back day in Charleston** follows the theme of the weekend – an exploration of the city's natural resources. It starts with a brunch at Husk, the hottest ticket in town, named the best restaurant of 2011 by *Bon Appetit*. I show up just before the 10 a.m. opening and within 15 minutes, I have a table on the second floor of the restored 1893 Queen Anne house. Like FIG, the menu changes daily, showcasing the best local ingredients. Chef Sean Brock, a 2010 James Beard Award winner, has taken the concept further, declaring that only Southern ingredients will pass through the door. So the Bloody Mary features homemade mix, a slice of pickled okra and a shaving of ham that transforms it into a Bloody unlike any other.

For the first course, it's the local Capers Inlet blade oysters with crabapple mignonette, small briny oysters with just enough sweetness prove an inspired match with the crabapple. Then comes the South Carolina quail stuffed with cornbread and house-made sausage, johnnycakes, and two poached farm eggs with spicy Hollandaise. The quail is moist, the stuffing just salty enough, the egg yolks like soft pudding, and the sliver of Hollandaise a perfect, light condiment.

With the attention to detail, the sense of history, and the showcasing of local gems from ambitious farmers and watermen, it is a meal not possible anywhere but Charleston. When I spoke with Mike Lata later, his explanation of what's going on in town rang true: Charleston has a taste like no other city.

In a city like New York, he says, there is an abundance of culinary technique and talent. "But they don't have a palate in New York City," he adds. "You go to California and there's a palate there. You can taste it in the food, the cuisine. I think Charleston, now more than ever, has a palate. When you come to Charleston, you taste what the city has to offer."

In the afternoon, I head away from the bustle of The Battery and East Bay, and over the bridge to Folly Beach where I make a quick stop at the Taco Boy, a local favorite. The spiced ahi tuna taco on a flour tortilla with cilantro Dijon sauce and salsa is so good that I dive in for more, and the kimchi beef with Korean barbecue sauce, kimchi and sesame seeds may be even better.

It's the right amount of fuel for my two-hour sunset kayak paddle with Tripp Copeland of Charleston Outdoor Adventures a couple of miles down the road.

Like his counterparts in town, Copeland is an enthusiast, reciting pieces of natural history about the grasses, the bottlenose dolphins that have learned to beach themselves to fish, the oyster beds, and the bevy of birds like the American Oystercatcher. It's a more organic, raw Charleston, a counterpoint to the refined food, history and architecture of the past two days. The freshness of the marsh with its green and tan grass, the solitude of paddling one stroke after another, and the curtain call – a brilliant orange sunset over calm waters – ease me back to simpler times on the edge of an old city made new again. **17**