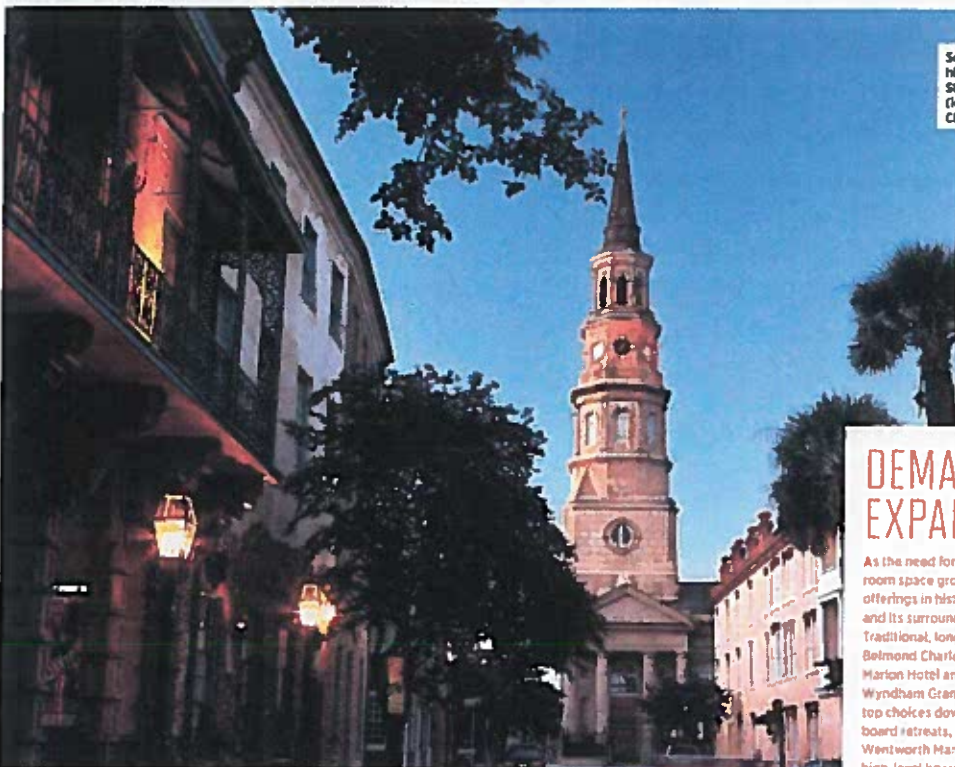


PLACES BUZZ | CITY SPOTLIGHT



Scenic views of Historic Dock Street Theater (left) leading up Church Street

THE HIGHS OF LOWCOUNTRY

IT'S KNOWN AS A DESTINATION FOR FOODIES AND HISTORY BUFFS, BUT CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA'S UNEXPECTED ART SCENE IS WHAT KEEPS CONFERENCE ATTENDEES COMING BACK FOR MORE.

BY NATALIE DUPUIS

Charleston, South Carolina, is a sought-after destination for obvious reasons. Historical, charming, beachy and elegant—it's got a lot going for it. Because it's a hot spot for leisure travelers, annual meetings and conferences typically see a higher attendee turnout when the event is held in the charismatic city, according to the local CVB. With nearly 4,000 rooms citywide and an airport adding new daily flights on the reg, Charleston is proving there are many highs in Lowcountry for meetings.

DEMAND TO EXPAND

As the need for more meeting and room space grows, so do the hotel offerings in historic Charleston and its surrounding boroughs. Traditional, longstanding hotels like Belmont Charleston Place, Francis Marion Hotel and The Mills House Wyndham Grand Hotel are always top choices downtown. For small board retreats, the five-star luxury Wentworth Mansion has hosted high-level board members and celebrities like Reese Witherspoon (a Southern charm connoisseur).

While historical properties are consistently in demand, new hotels are popping up. They may not have much meeting space of their own, but hotels aren't necessarily missing it in a town like Charleston, abundant with off-site venues. Take The Spectator Hotel for example, a high-end, 41-room boutique hotel that opened in 2015. Its partnership with its sister property French Quarter Inn allows for usage of its 1,200 square feet of meeting space. The 54-room Restoration is another new boutique property with a rooftop event space for up to 80 people overlooking the Charleston Harbor.

Outside downtown, the recently renovated Charleston Area Convention Center has a growing neighborhood of big-brand hotel properties with a combined 150,000 square feet of meeting space, about 800 guest rooms and a 2,300-seat performing arts center.

BOB WELLS





Trading Spaces

Look to these three off-site venues to play host to experiential learning sessions and impressive receptions that ooze Southern sensibility.

Gaillard Center

Charleston is a town made for the arts. Each summer, the famous Spoleto Festival USA descends upon the historic city for three weeks. This year, its home was the completely reconstructed Gaillard Center (above). It has a 1,800-seat performance hall and 32,000 square feet of ballroom space. The handcrafted building pays homage to the history and allure of Charleston and will wow attendees from the moment they step inside.

The Gallery Room at The Venue

Situated a few blocks' walk from the popular Waterfront Park, the Battery and Rainbow Row, The Venue is a historic property with a focus on art and culture. Its new Gallery Room is elegantly decorated with original artwork and can host up to 75 guests. The Venue reopened in 2014 after rebranding as a hotel dedicated to cultivating and promoting the arts.

Boone Hall Plantation

If you've watched any Nicholas Sparks movies, you've probably seen Boone Hall Plantation. Spanish moss dripping from centuries-old oak trees lining a long driveway is a quintessentially Southern scene, and a romantic one at that, as it has set the stage for movies like "The Notebook"—as well as the real-life wedding of actors Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds. For corporate groups, that atmosphere lends itself best to evening events of up to 300 on the Cotton Dock; 65 on the front lawn of the plantation house; and large tented events in the backyard.

STYLING: CYPRESS GRILL 225

EAST BAY STREET DELIGHTS

You'd be hard-pressed to find a "bad" restaurant anywhere in downtown historic Charleston, but the core of the top eats in the city is congregated on East Bay Street. Just past Charleston City Market.

HIGH COTTON

VIBE Owned and operated by a prominent Charleston family, High Cotton has all the Southern charm and elegance one would expect from a traditional Lowcountry establishment.
WHAT TO SERVE It sounds crazy to be in Charleston and not order seafood, but the Maple Leaf Farms duck is a can't-miss item. The peach compote makes all the difference.
EVENT SPACE High Cotton has three separate dining areas, the largest of which holds 100 seated. A semiprivate cobblestone-lined outdoor space behind the restaurant can be set with highboys for cocktail hour.

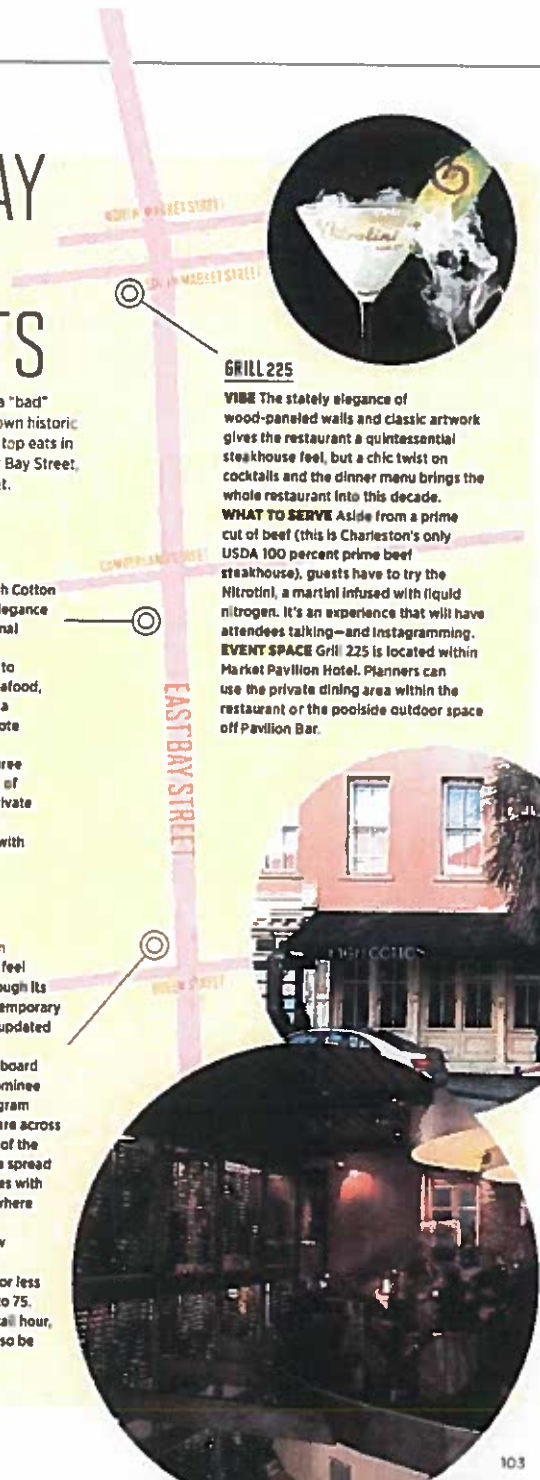
CYPRESS

VIBE The food is a modern take on traditional Southern fare, and the feel of the restaurant reflects that through its historical brick building with contemporary color-changing light fixtures and updated decor and seating.
WHAT TO SERVE The charcuterie board and cheese plate. James Beard nominee chef Craig Delhi's charcuterie program has resulted in an artisan meat share across the Lowcountry, making for some of the most diverse and tasty charcuterie spread on the East Coast. The board comes with a printed layout card of how and where each meat is made.
EVENT SPACE As one of only a few two-story restaurants in the city, Cypress has its second level more or less reserved for private groups of up to 75. There is an upstairs bar for a cocktail hour, and the private dining room can also be split into two smaller spaces.



GRILL 225

VIBE The stately elegance of wood-paneled walls and classic artwork gives the restaurant a quintessential steakhouse feel, but a chic twist on cocktails and the dinner menu brings the whole restaurant into this decade.
WHAT TO SERVE Aside from a prime cut of beef (this is Charleston's only USDA 100 percent prime beef steakhouse), guests have to try the Nitrofini, a martini infused with liquid nitrogen. It's an experience that will have attendees talking—and Instagramming.
EVENT SPACE Grill 225 is located within Market Pavilion Hotel. Planners can use the private dining area within the restaurant or the poolside outdoor space off Pavilion Bar.



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