

HEADS UP

# Charleston's (Now) Great Hall



Kate Thornton for The New York Times

Part of the expansive open-air section of the newly renovated Charleston City Market, no longer just for tourists.

By ROSE MAURA LORRE

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ON the June morning when the Great Hall at the Charleston City Market, in Charleston, S.C., reopened to the public after an 18-month renovation, spotting the locals amid the vacationing throngs was easy. While the outnumbered Charlestonians tended to favor muted office attire over the kaleidoscopic cruisewear of some tourists, what truly set them apart as they entered the overhauled, 204-year-old structure was their amazed expressions.

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“Really, this is transforming it from a tourist-only destination,” remarked Alton Brown, a real estate broker whose office is a few blocks from the market. “The key to downtown is being able to have a place to walk to like this.”

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For decades, the **Charleston City Market** (188 Meeting Street; 843-937-0920; [thecharlestoncitymarket.com](http://thecharlestoncitymarket.com)) had been saddled with a tourist-trap reputation, best known as a dank, dilapidated location for hawking cheap trinkets. Now its Great Hall — one of four adjacent structures that comprise the market, and the recipient of its last and most dramatic face-lift — is retrofitted with both air-conditioning and ceiling fans, a skylight running the length of its blocklong roof, a pair of dining spots (a barbecue “cue-osc” stands opposite Caviar & Bananas, a new food counter), and 20 “microboutiques” — locally owned retail spaces of 300 to 400 square feet each that share an open floor plan.

“It really is a wow factor compared to what it used to be,” said Kris Furniss, observing the steady stream of patrons at **Caviar & Bananas** (843-577-7757; [caviarandbananas.com](http://caviarandbananas.com)), which he owns with his wife, Margaret. “It was serpentine, and you felt like you were in a maze. I only came down here when I had to.”

“The primary goal was to bring Charlestonians back,” said Hank Holliday, who headed up a team of local developers that took over the market’s lease in 2008. The group devoted an entire year to visiting public markets worldwide, including ones in [San Francisco](#), [Havana](#) and [Lyon, France](#). “We studied the nuances of a successful public market,” Mr. Holliday said, “and more importantly, the elements that tied successful public markets to local communities.”

Anchoring the Great Hall at its western end is its newly acquired flagship tenant, **Historic Charleston Foundation** (843-723-1623; [historiccharleston.org](http://historiccharleston.org)). Like Caviar & Bananas and a handful of other Great Hall vendors, its market shop functions as a condensed outpost of a separate Charleston location. In addition to browsing the array of Charleston-themed memorabilia and historical publications and reproductions, visitors can purchase tickets to tour the foundation’s two house museums, each less than a mile away.

Another such shop is the **Chuma Gullah Gallery** (843-722-1702; [gallerychuma.com](http://gallerychuma.com)), which has dedicated its microboutique to the best-selling Gullah artists from its primary gallery space a few blocks away. “For many years in our main gallery, all the tourists would run in asking where the market was,” said Chuma Nwokike, the owner, whose voice had already grown hoarse a few hours after the market opened.



For other purveyors, it's the open layout of the new market that is the biggest improvement. **Gita's Gourmet** (843-722-8207) has been selling its jellies, teas and benne wafers in the Great Hall since 1974. "They used to have bars on the windows, and we were used to having an enclosed shop," said Bill Ussery, an owner. "Now it's more visible, more inviting. I think people will want to come in now — although they actually don't have to come into the shop, they can just see."

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