

Charleston was a natural for a food renaissance



Rainbow Row
Jerome Levine/For Tribune Newspapers, Chicago Tribune

In Charleston, even the buildings are appetizing, such as Rainbow Row on East Bay Street.
Cooking
Charleston is a rich Southern nugget for foodies

The cuisine of Charleston reflects such a distinct melange of ingredients and traditions that visitors from other regions of the U.S. may feel as if they've arrived on a foreign shore.

This is the land where menus populated with regional favorites — such as she-crab soup, Charleston red rice, shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes, pickled okra, Hoppin' John, benne wafers and coconut cake — are luring food lovers from around the world.

Last year more than 4.5 million people visited Charleston, the oldest and second-largest city in South Carolina. Founded by English colonists more than 300 years ago, the luster of "The Holy City" (nicknamed for the numerous church steeples that dominate its otherwise low skyline) hasn't faded.

Despite having been ravaged by the Civil War in 1861, a 7.3-magnitude earthquake in 1886, and Hurricane Hugo in 1989, Charleston not only has persevered but has thrived. In 2014, the city ranked No. 1 (in the U.S. and Canada) in the Travel + Leisure World's Best Awards and No. 1 city (in the U.S.) in the Conde Nast Traveler Reader's Choice Awards.

Located on a scenic peninsula at the confluence of the Ashley and Cooper rivers and surrounded by sea islands, the downtown historic area is relatively flat, laid out in a simple grid. Ironically, because the city didn't have the financial wherewithal to rebuild or remodel structures devastated by the war, Charleston displays a remarkably intact and varied architectural history with more than 3,500 well-preserved buildings. In fact, the nation's first historical preservation zoning ordinance was passed in Charleston.

The city's culinary renaissance

Experts mark the late 1970s as the turning point for the ascent of Charleston as a food destination. In 1977, the city was chosen to host the U.S. version of the Spoleto Festival for the performing arts. With an influx of sophisticated guests arriving for 17 days each spring, restaurants ramped up their efforts to cater to Europeans and other visitors, said Erin Perkins, editor of the online publication Eater Charleston.

Of course, Charleston already was well poised to create a culinary stir on the basis of its singular mix of geography, terroir and traditions.

"Charleston is surrounded by fertile fields, vibrant forests and thriving estuaries that serve as fish and shellfish incubators as well as by a massively stocked ocean," explained Eve Felder, an executive chef and Charleston native who is managing director of the Singapore campus of the Culinary Institute of America.

"In addition to the abundance of ingredients, the city's food heritage also derives from the varied cultural influences of its citizens: people of African descent, the French Huguenots and the English aristocracy," she said.

Many dishes reflect Charleston's Lowcountry history and coastal location too. "This unique cuisine is based on the abundance of products brought by African slaves (such as

okra, eggplant, sesame and their knowledge of rice cultivation), and the indigenous foods of the region (creek shrimp, blue crabs, wild tuna, flounder and bass; marsh hens, wild ducks, geese, turkey, quail and deer; and scuppernong grapes and wild mushrooms)," Felder said. Some of the region's best vegetables are grown in nearby barrier islands, such as Wadmalaw and Edisto, she added.

The roots of Southern cooking run deep in Charleston, said Perkins of Eater Charleston. She noted that the 1984 opening of a Johnson & Wales University campus in the city (offering programs in food service, hospitality and travel tourism) also inspired a cadre of talented and committed culinary professionals. Although the campus was consolidated with the one in Charlotte, N.C., 20 years later, many graduates remained in Charleston and in other parts of the South, reinterpreting the fried chicken and pickled vegetable recipes handed down generations ago.

Lead with your nose

The diverse neighborhoods within downtown Charleston are eminently walkable (There's also a free trolley system). Wherever you go, you're likely to find a restaurant, bar, cafe, market or bakery with local flavor and extremely friendly and solicitous wait staff. Precious few are part of national chains.

"Stay downtown and roam her streets and follow your nose," Felder said. "Get an early morning start and explore the alleys, cobblestone streets, nooks and crannies and let Charleston embrace you with her magic."

Depending on your budget and the time you have available, here are some options for the first-timer:

Take a tasting tour — A number of companies offer tasting tours of the city. For example, Charleston Strolls features 2½-hour Savor the Flavors tours by licensed guides that allow participants to taste specialties such as stone ground grits, benne wafers, locally made gourmet chocolates, southern pralines, sweet tea, collard greens and Lowcountry barbecue.

Attend a food festival — Many tourists plan their visit around one of the annual festivals that showcase Charleston's culinary treasures. These include Taste of Charleston (September), The Lowcountry Oyster Festival (January), and the 5-day BB&T Charleston Wine + Food Festival (March), now in its tenth year with over 160 participating chefs from Charleston and across the country.

Visit the city market — The Charleston City Market, one of the oldest public markets in the country, occupies a series of sheds from Meeting Street to the Cooper River. Originally erected in 1804, it once sold meat, fish and vegetables. The complex has seen its share of adversity, too—destroyed by fire in 1838 and damaged by tornadoes nearly a century later. In 1973, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and received a \$5.5 million makeover in 2010.

The market is home to 285 local vendors selling local jams and fruit preserves, pickled and dried foods, candies, boiled peanuts, crafts and other quintessential Lowcountry souvenirs. Artists of African origin make and sell hand-woven sweetgrass baskets, used during colonial times to separate rice seed from its chaff.

Rely on the advice of local experts — Restaurant menus are built on local, seasonal ingredients that reflect the city's "sense of place." Be sure to taste characteristic foods and products of the region, and sample dishes that have brought national acclaim to the city's long list of award-winning chefs.

The experts at Eater Charleston recently compiled various lists (with reviews) of essential restaurants (not-to-be-missed classics) <http://www.tinyurl.com/charlclassics>, oldest restaurants (noteworthy for their longevity) <http://www.tinyurl.com/charloldest> and "hot" restaurants (that are popular at the moment) <http://www.tinyurl.com/charlhot>.

The dilemma for any food enthusiast visiting Charleston for the first time likely will be one of overchoice rather than overpromise.

If you go

Charleston Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, <http://www.charlestoncvb.com>

Charleston Free Trolley, <http://www.tinyurl.com/charlestontrolley>

Charleston Food Tours (cost \$50 per person), <http://www.zerve.com/Bulldog/Savor>

Charleston City Market, <http://www.thecharlestoncitymarket.com>

short list

Peninsula Grill: Elegant fine-dining experience in a circa 1844 building with courtyard; don't miss the mile-high coconut cake. <http://www.peninsulagrill.com>

Husk: Chef Sean Brock showcases Southern ingredients, including heirloom greens and grains, on a menu that changes daily. <http://www.huskrestaurant.com/about>

The Vendue: Rooftop bar at boutique hotel offering sweeping views of Charleston Harbor. <http://www.thevendue.com>

Chez Nous: Meals with a European flair at a tiny restored home on an alley off Spring Street. <http://www.cheznouschs.com>

Hominy Grill: Casual spot for Lowcountry favorites prepared by chef Robert Stehling; don't miss the pickled okra. <http://www.hominygrill.com>

The MacIntosh: Chef Jeremiah Bacon emphasizes local ingredients; don't miss The Mac Attack, a creative Lowcountry take on classic Eggs Benedict.
<http://www.themacintoshcharleston.com>

FIG: Laid-back, unpretentious low-country food prepared by chef Mike Lata; don't miss the heirloom tomato salad and ricotta gnocchi. <http://www.eatatfig.com/menus>

Fish: Local, seasonal, sustainable seafood; don't miss the bouillabaisse and naked fish, prepared simply with salt and pepper. <http://www.fishrestaurantcharleston.com>

JB's Smokeshack: Lowcountry barbecue or fried chicken at a quirky roadside shack on nearby Johns Island. <http://www.jbssmokeshack.com>

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