

A community of chefs

Culinary passion and community support a recipe for dining success

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By Forrest Parker



Last night I joined a diverse mess of chefs and impassioned members of the Charleston Slow Foods community in celebrating the return of Seashore Black Rye. Chefs had come in from Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina and from Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry to celebrate the repatriation and restoration of this landrace grain, once a staple in the Southeast. Both the happy hour and the sit-down supper were sold out and the amount of talent in that space was staggering.

I love doing events like these. Part of me is, has been and will always be, geeking out to know I'm cooking elbow to elbow with the likes of John Currence, Jacques Larson or Tyler Brown. When I was younger I was drawn to the limelight, but these days, it's because I know these chefs and both admire and respect their work.

Now, in between plating courses, there are the opportunities to catch up, ask how their families are, and what direction they're moving in professionally.

As a young culinarian in 1996, it was an exciting time as we began to open Louis Osteen's eponymous restaurant. Around the block at the Peninsula Grill, a chef named Bob Carter was getting ready to make his own mark. It was a formative time for me, as it was for many young cooks. On any given night after service, the bars at The Griffon or the old Vickery's were filled with young cooks, usually grouped by their restaurants. I could walk in and spot the crews from P-Grill, my mates from Louis's, McCrady's, Charleston Place or SNOB. There was a lot of attitude, a lot of passion. But there was also a shared belief that a rising tide lifts all boats, and as much as we all wanted to shine, we also wanted Charleston to shine and to continue to grow.

That shared belief is still very much prevalent today. Times have changed, methods and presentations have changed. The industry is still hard—grueling hours, inconsistent wage

standards, an ability to hire anyone willing to do the diligence and learn your craft before moving on. It's a hard business we have as chefs. But that sense of community has just grown bigger and wider.

I would eventually leave Charleston for opportunities in big casinos up North, and for a stint as executive chef at Opryland in Nashville. When I finally returned to Charleston in 2012, the city and its restaurant scene had just gotten bigger and bigger. But so had its sense of self.

These days, instead of just being about the chefs, we are acutely aware as chefs that it's really about Charleston and our relationships: our community of farmers, fishermen and artisan suppliers, our families that work around the long hours we put in and sacrifices we make, the friends and guests that support what we're doing, as passionate as they are critical.

We foster these relationships in the name of continuing to make things better, to make our city, our industry and our lives better. Ratings will rise and fall with the tides, and Charleston may not always be in the limelight. But this industry, these chefs and the people of Charleston will not relent. Charleston is the number one city not because of her chefs, but because of us, each other, and all our myriad differences and contributions we bring to the table. Isn't that the most delicious of recipes?

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