

LOCAL FLAVOR CHARLESTON

Morning Glory

Kick off a day in
Charleston with a bowl
of shrimp and grits

By Andrew Nelson

A savory bowl of shrimp and grits, long a staple of Southern cuisine, is having a moment in South Carolina's Holy City, where creative cooks are transforming the traditional morning meal of milled ground corn and freshly netted local shrimp. Low Country farmers, fishers, and chefs are stirring it up in new ways inspired by Charleston's heritage.

For reasons both cultural and culinary, the humble dish is associated with the city's African-American community. "Grits could feed a lot of people cheaply, and shrimp was a protein that was easily accessible," says chef Benjamin "BJ" Dennis, a Charleston

caterer whose cooking draws from the Gullah Geechee culture and has helped revive heritage grains, such as Carolina Gold rice. "Grits are directly linked with the experience of African Americans in the city and the Low Country," he says.

Charleston is on a quest to study and acknowledge previously ignored African-American contributions to its story. Evidence of this history appears on every corner, from the **OLD SLAVE MART** on Chalmers Street to **GADSDEN'S WHARF**, a point of disembarkation for enslaved Africans and site of the **INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM**, set to open in 2020.



ORIANA KOREN (ALL PHOTOS)

"It's been estimated that 80 percent of African Americans can trace at least one side of their family to an ancestor who was forcibly brought to the New World through the slave port of Charleston," says chef and instructor Kevin Mitchell of the Culinary Institute of Charleston. "In the 18th and 19th centuries, the great Charleston chefs like Nat Fuller, Tom Tully, and Eliza Seymour Lee were African Americans."

Today shrimp and grits occupies a central place on restaurant menus from South of Broad to the top of King Street. Frequently made with heirloom corn, grits can come in hues of pink, blue, red, yellow, and white. Each is different. They can taste nutty or sweet, and cook up creamy or al dente. Greg Johnsman of Geechie Boy Mill, a small-batch grain producer that uses antique gristmills, serves Guinea Flint grits with shrimp (plus parmesan cheese, country ham, tomatoes, scallions, and red-eye gravy) at his restaurant **MILLERS ALL DAY**. A once-lost strain locally, Guinea Flint was rediscovered in Africa and brought back to South Carolina.

"In whatever variety, in whatever else we add, we will always have shrimp and grits," says chef Forrest Parker of **REVIVAL** restaurant. "I couldn't conceive of Charleston without it."

Greatest Grits

SLIGHTLY NORTH OF BROAD

Though locals often refer to it by the acronym SNOB, Charleston's first farm-to-table restaurant is anything but haughty. The convivial Low Country bistro's seasonal menus include whatever the farmers are bringing to the kitchen.

At left, Slightly North of Broad's take on shrimp and grits includes housemade sausage and country ham. Clockwise from top right: downtown Charleston; boats at Waterfront Park; shrimp and grits at Millers All Day; and heirloom grains ground by Geechie Boy Mill, including Guinea Flint and Jimmy Red grits.

MILLERS ALL DAY

True to its name, Millers whips up breakfast (hand-milled grits and waffles are on the menu) all day long, as well as other Southern comfort food—biscuits, corn muffins, and fried chicken—in a mid-century modern interior close to King and Broad Streets.

REVIVAL

Located in the Vendue Hotel in Charleston's French Quarter, Forrest Parker's restaurant has earned acclaim for dishes featuring local produce, like Bradford watermelons, and regional specialties, such as Low Country pirlou (a flavorful rice pilaf) made with poached lobster.

