



charleston

A GASTRONOMY TOUR OF THE OLD SOUTH



From Revolutionary War patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Heyward, Jr., and Maj. Robert Anderson, the Union Army officer who commanded Fort Sumter during the first shot of the Civil War, to today's Air Force C-17 Loadmaster at Charleston AFB, and the student at the Navy's Nuclear A-school, Charleston, S.C., has a rich military tradition of hosting America's service members.

Don't let the innocent white steeples of the "Holy City" fool you, though. Behind the wrought-iron gates and shy, sideways-facing entries of opulent 250-year-old homes lies a colorful city with regionally renowned cuisine, hot beaches, and the subtly, snarky charm of the old South. Let the scent of a

thousandjasmine flowers blooming in the city lure your senses. It's the perfect getaway for the gay traveler and a choice military assignment.

But the soft scents of the sea and gardens are not what brought me to Charleston. My taste buds enticed me here. Eating is a serious pastime for travelers and locals alike in Charleston. When I read the city hosts *Bon Appétit Magazine's* 2011 #1 "Best New Restaurant" in America—**Husk**—I decided a gastronomy tour of Charleston was in order.

Armed with reservations, I set to eat my way through Charleston's culinary wonderland of low-country, eclectic, local and sustainable fare. Throw out your no-carb, anti-gluten, trend diet, add a stick of butter to your grits, and book the next flight.

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY /// DAVID SMALL



(Counter Clockwise from top: The Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge spans the Cooper River connecting downtown Charleston to Mount Pleasant. (It is the third longest cable-stayed bridge in the western hemisphere.), The Mills House Hotel, Husk Restaurant, Castle Pickney in Charleston Harbor.



Top (left to right): The Citadel cadets; Catfish Row (the inspiration behind *Porgy and Bess*)
 Bottom (left to right): Rainbow Row; Dock St. Theater (Oldest Theater in America); Fort Sumter

As this was a last-minute trip, I couldn't get into any of the numerous bed and breakfasts, so we opted for **The Mills House Hotel**, a 150-year-old InterContinental Hotels Group property.

Aim for lodging on Charleston's peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers and south of Calhoun St. This area's resilience against hurricanes, earthquakes and war, coupled with the city's preservation laws dating to 1930, make Charleston's **French Quarter** a beautiful area to wander and get lost. No real Charlestonian refers to this as the French Quarter, however. It is simply downtown.

If you are a timelier planner than I, book a B&B. The B&B at **4 Unity Alley** is an 18th century warehouse transformed into a gay-owned grand home.

There are plenty of mainstream lodging options, too. If you prefer to stay a few blocks closer to late nightlife, consider the **Hampton Inn**.

Upon settling in, we set out for priority #1: food. It was a brisk and clear evening yet we were able to score a table on Husk's second floor porch of the restored 1893 Queen Anne home located in the center of town. Executive chef Sean Brock boasts a healthy sense of humor with his food. On Easter Sunday, my meal opened with a

North Carolina rabbit country pâté with a pickled egg, shaved carrot and pea shoot salad, lightly brushed with citrus vinaigrette and toast points. In other words, on Easter Sunday, I ate the Easter Bunny. And he was delicious.

The meal progressed with a duo of heritage pork from rocker-turned-farmer Adam Musick's farm in Virginia. Each cut of meat was shredded, then reformed into a cube and served with smoky field peas, butterbeans, Charleston Gold rice and a small piece of succulent pork belly.

My traveling companion chose the roasted chicken breast with barbecue farro. For the table, we enjoyed baked Geechie Boy grits with South Carolina oyster mushrooms topped with cheddar cheese from Tennessee.

Dessert brought us two selections. The first, a rice pudding, was creamy and adorned with tangy grapefruit marmalade. The second, dubbed lemon pie in a jar, was something to worship. This deconstructed pie had a layer of espresso ganache that allowed the combination of lemon, pie and espresso flavors to come to you one by one, like a stage manager on my tongue, directing each taste to arrive consecutively on cue.

DAY 1

When visiting a new city, it can be a good idea to get the lay of the land and hit the highlights efficiently through a guided tour. In Charleston, the typical method for such is by horse-drawn carriage.

We chose a more intimate experience with a local art historian, **Fern**, on the **Architectural Walking Tour of Charleston** (architecturalwalkingtoursofcharleston.com).

Highlights of the tour included the oldest standing tavern in the South, **The Pink House**, which has morphed into **The Pink House Gallery** (pinkhousegallery.tripod.com), **Rainbow Row**, the Old Powder Magazine of the walled city, and the beef market, now a popular place to buy trinkets on **Market St.**

The souvenir to bring home is a sweet grass basket, sold at ridiculous prices by local crafters whom have passed the weaving technique through generations from Gullah tradition. For a less pricey Gullah basket, stop at one of the shacks on Hwy 31 in Mount Pleasant.

While no neighborhood is truly a gayborhood, it is said that **Harleston Village** on the west side of the peninsula near Colonial Lake is the most diverse community,



Top (left to right): Hominy Grill's Shrimp and Grits; The French Quarter
Bottom (left to right): Hominy Grill; St. Phillip's Church; The Pink House (the oldest house in Charleston)

engaged in gentrifying the old homes.

Exhausted from nearly three hours of brisk walking, we settled into the garden courtyard of **Eli's Table** for lunch. The dish to write home about here is Eli's grilled cheese sandwich, a.k.a. "The Thomas Paine." While it sounds pedestrian, it is anything but. On crisply grilled sourdough were tomatoes, basil and melted cheddar cheese. If you don't hit this place for lunch or brunch, consider one of their wine-pairing events or live jazz Thursdays.

While most tourists flock to **Hymans Seafood** and wait in long lines for dinner (the Food Channel Network and *Southern Living* named it the best seafood restaurant in the Southeast), we went with a more low-key, local's favorite: **Amen Street Fish and Raw Bar**. Named for a bygone street home many churches, this restaurant opened in 2009, restoring the historic corner's name. Here, you'll want to order fresh, local fish. Leave the low-country selections for other restaurants and focus on a clean, basic dish. I selected a blackened striped bass served with popcorn rice, haricot verts, and

marinated tomatoes. East coast snapper, wahoo, marlin, sheepshead and swordfish are also on the menu, depending on the day's catch. However, do start with their notable shrimp corndogs—large, whole shrimp battered and fried in cornmeal. Another good starter is the She Crab soup—topped, of course, with a splash of sherry.

April is the end of oyster season in South Carolina. I sampled two unique varieties—Bulls Bay Cups and Carolina Cups—both from South Carolina. Anywhere else, oyster season is any month ending in "R," but in Charleston, the season extends to April. Skip dessert here. The bland and soggy coconut pie isn't worth the calories.

DAY 2

Once you've carb-loaded your morning, set out to explore some of the places you passed on your guided tour. Start with the **Hayward-Washington House**, 87 Church St., where you'll be regaled with the life of a rice planter from revolutionary times and see where George Washington slept.

While you're "South of Broad" wander-

ing the neighborhood, walk over to the most photographed homes of the city along the **Battery**.

You could spend your entire trip touring grand old homes open to the public and admiring the period Charleston-made furnishings. If you do focus on the architecture of Charleston, one restaurant not to miss is the local favorite, **Cru Café**.

You'll learn Charleston has high regards for their unique home style, called the single house. The Cru Café is in one of these 18th century single houses, converted into a restaurant, with small tables along the sideways porch to seat people drinking mint juleps. Known for its comfort food, this restaurant has filled the void for lunch-bound locals.

The thick, juicy Angus burger au poivre, served with pepper jack and cheddar cheeses, poblano, bacon and caramelized onions, and flavor-filled shrimp B.L.T with pepper jack cheese are hearty enough to keep you touring or shopping throughout the afternoon.

Prefer to take a break and pamper

yourself? Men, head over to the **Gents Barberspa**, 32 Vendue Range, to spruce up your look for the evening. Take them up on their offer of a free beer, lay back and enjoy an old-school gentleman's hot shave.

Freshly shaven, head down the block to the **Gin Joint**, Charleston's premier cocktail laboratory, expertly mixing pre-prohibition libations. Casually energetic, give Joe, the bartender and owner, two adjectives to describe your drinking mood and he will create you a masterpiece. Alternatively, order a smoked maple old-fashioned—made with wild turkey rye 101

proof, smoked maple syrup and black walnut bitters. In the town that boasted the first artificial ice in 1851, I was pleased to have my first spherical ice "cube."

Continuing the day's theme of drinking, **FIG (Food is Good)** also has a creative cocktail program. Executive Chef Mike Lata doesn't stop with the food, though. This restaurant was, by far, the best service I've ever experienced eating out anywhere, ever—almost demanding the positive note we sent to not-hard-on-the-eyes general manager Brooks Reitz, who acknowledged, "I count my staff as the best in town—a group that works tirelessly

toward the pursuit of perfection."

For dinner, I went with soft-shelled crab grenobloise with young ramps and globe artichokes. Where most chefs would batter and fry the dish, Lata pays homage to the crab's freshness in a simple sauté.

Dessert was my favorite sweet treat of the trip: a dripping wet, sticky, rich sorghum cake with walnut ice cream.

For those who wish to further the day's drinking theme, hit Charleston's best beer selection, **Closed for Business Draught Emporium**, boasting 42 beers on tap. Bars close at 2 a.m. in Charleston.



Middleton Place plantation is America's oldest landscaped gardens. Lying on the Ashley River, visitors can get a glimpse of how rice was cultivated in colonial times.

DAY 3

For the solitary purpose of aiding digestion, we scheduled a spa day. Despite the plethora of more reasonable options, we went for the gusto and booked a day full of services for both of us at **The Spa at Charleston Place** (charlestonplace.com).

The staff there was friendly, and all of our treatments put us into a relaxed, healthy state. However, for the opulence exuding from an **Orient Express Hotel**, I expected a much more serene atmosphere. But my standards are a bit high.

En Route to our appointments, we stopped at the new **Whisk Bakery**, serving

artisanal breads and pastries made daily by Vinzenz Aschbacher. This small bakery became our choice breakfast location, visiting three times and sampling delectably gooey cinnamon buns and various Danish—the cherry filling being our favorite. Whisk also brews the best coffee in Charleston, a locally roasted brand called King Bean.

It pains me to admit publicly, we ended up hungry in front of a chain restaurant. **Sticky Fingers Smokehouse**, though, isn't just any chain. My one caveat to the "thou shalt not eat at a restaurant with pictures on its menu" rule allows exceptions for

chains that have local beginnings. The first Sticky Fingers opened in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., in 1992, with a passion for fall-off-the-bone-delicious ribs, pulled pork barbecue, and chicken. We split a pulled pork plate and elected the Tennessee Whiskey winner among their five sauce selections.

For dinner, we headed for an early reservation at the **Peninsula Grill** at the **Planters Inn**. I'm not going to lie; we were primarily there for the coconut cake. It is often disputed, but officially recognized with 12 layers of yummy goodness that is refined to perfection by pastry chef Claire Chapman. The cake is infused with coco-





Angel Oak Park



nut and fresh vanilla, and the pound cake center is topped with icing and coated in freshly toasted coconut. Each slice served is large enough to have its own zip code. Curse my waistline, as this 5-inch-tall, 12-pound confection can be ordered online and shipped direct to my mouth!

Prepare to linger; start with dessert first, as the entrees were so magnificent, it takes serious effort to make room for the must-do cake. My thick, juicy Angus filet, sinfully grilled to a medium rare, came with a foie gras truffle butter to slather on every bite. The side of wild mushroom grits complemented the steak with its earthy richness.

If you're one to spread wasabi on your sushi, seek out their horseradish hushpuppies.

After dinner, stroll down the road for some local, \$5 entertainment at **Theatre 99** (theatre99.com), Charleston's longtime home for improv comedy.

DAY 4

On April 12, the first shot of the civil war fired 151 years earlier, required we roust ourselves early and take a tour of **Fort Sumter** via **Spirit Line Cruises** (spiritlinecruises.com). Once you arrive on the island, it is worth it to pause and get the history from the park ranger.

With the car out of valet to get to the dock at **Liberty Square**, the first and only time during the trip that wheels were necessary, we ventured outside downtown for nationally acclaimed and locally beloved **Hominy Grill**. Chef Robert Stehling's shrimp and grits were on my to-do list. His are sautéed with scallions, mushrooms and bacon, and served over cheese grits. With a spicy bloody mary adorned with an okra shoot, a crab cake entrée, and a disappointing attempt at fried green tomatoes, we didn't have room for their signature buttermilk pie. Sunday brunch is the preferred meal for this locale.

Afterwards, we chose to leave the peninsula for one activity, driving to **Johns Island's Angel Oak Park** with its ancient live oak, thought to be one of the oldest living organisms east of the Mississippi.

If looking at a big, albeit amazing, tree doesn't pickle your whistle, perhaps go to Mount Pleasant's **Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum** (patriotspoint.org) with its fleet of national historic landmark ships, including the **USS Yorktown** and the official **Medal of Honor Museum**.

But as the adage goes, it's pretty queer when the ship's in pier—so instead, hit the beach. While there are many from which to choose, the gay friendliest beach, according to the locals, is a section of **Folly Beach** (follybeach.com) near the hip **Tides Folly Beach Hotel** (tidesfollybeach.com).

Lastly, taking advantage of "day with car," you might visit one of the many historic plantation homes along the Ashley River. We visited **Drayton Hall** (draytonhall.org), only nine miles from downtown, the oldest unrestored plantation house in America open to the public.





Charleston skyline

Next door to Drayton Hall, we also hit **Middleton Place Plantation** (middleton-place.org), America's oldest landscaped gardens.

Need a shopping fix? Peruse **King Street**, which transitions as you walk south from shops you'd find in most upscale malls, to the **Shops at Charleston Place** with high-end clothiers, to boutiques, to expensive antique shops. Make sure to hit the **Preservation Society of Charleston's** shop, 147 King St. I also enjoyed the **Heirloom Book Co.**, 123 King St., which only sells hard-to-find cookbooks. If you're a true master in the kitchen, hit **Charleston Cooks!** (charlestoncooks.com). For a unique Charleston gift any dandy man would relish, hit **Ben Silver** (bensilver.com), a classic American haberdasher with roots in Charleston, and pick up a unique set of blazer buttons.

After our trek across the bridge, we headed for dinner at **Slightly North of Broad**, or as the locals call it, S.N.O.B.—named for its proximity to Broad St. and the haughty air that those South of Broad purportedly breathe. S.N.O.B. serves eclectic, low-country bistro fare. Executive Chef Frank Lee combines a French technique with Southern ingredients and is recognized as the guiding force behind the culinary re-

naissance in Charleston.

While my roasted lamb rack with a cabernet rosemary sauce and the pan seared scallops were both perfectly delicious meals, it was the ambiance of this restaurant that won us over. The charm of Charleston's people and the closely aligned seats allowed cross-table conversations to permeate the meal.

Afterwards, we hit the **Dock Street Theatre** (charlestonstage.com), the first stage theater in America, for a local production of "The Wiz".

DAY 5

The theme for the day was Guy Fieri's show, "Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives" on the Food Network. When traveling, always hit the site flavortownusa.com to see which local establishments have been worthy of a TV visit. Charleston has a couple. At the **Dixie Supply Bakery & Café**, a slice of tomato pie is a must. Not-too-watery layers of meaty tomatoes, cheddar cheese and basil combine in a flakey pie shell for a mouth-watering experience.

For the morning's activity, we rented bikes from **The Bicycle Shoppe** (thebicycleshoppecharleston.com) and trekked north for a tour of **The Military College of**

South Carolina, The Citadel (citadel.edu). Schedule your stop for their summer Friday parades.

A great place to spend a lazy afternoon outdoors and away from tourists is another DDD highlight—**Fuel Caribbean Cantina**. Chef and owner Justin Broome makes a scrumptious grilled mahi-mahi taco with avocado pico, spicy pineapple relish and colorful purple slaw.

After lunch, we were fortunate enough to be in town for the **Historic Charleston Foundation's** (historiccharleston.org) biannual home and garden tour. Perhaps you'll be in town for any one of many other festivals and events. Last month, Charleston transformed itself into an artist's haven with its **Piccolo Spoleto** (piccolospoleto.com).

Otherwise, visit any one of many museums or art galleries. Charleston boasts the first public museum in America, **The Charleston Museum** (charlestonmuseum.org), founded in 1773. My favorite gallery was **Dog & Horse Fine Art and Portraiture** (dogandhorsefineart.com), mostly for the loveable cocker spaniel, Lucy, who greeted us at the door.

With only one night left, we hit **McCrary's**, Charleston's oldest restaurant, dating back to 1778. Choosing the four-course mini tast-



Left to Right: Middleton Place's Restaurant's Fried Chicken; Fuel Cantina's Mahi tacos and shredded pork tacos; Peninsula Grill's 13-layer coconut cake

ing menu option, this was our highest food expenditure of the week, and completely worth it.

I started with a green garlic soup with Capers Inlet clams, sheep's milk yogurt, kimchee and benne. For my fish course, I chose the grilled cobia in a country ham broth, meaty collard greens, ramps and rhubarb. Moving along, my meat course was a duck, aged and roasted on the bone, served with pine nuts cooked in the style of risotto, with turnips and arugula. For dessert, I had the Anson Mills cornmeal cake—a somewhat disappointing finish.

My guest started with a roasted beet and Ambrose strawberry salad. Her flounder, crusted with herb and vegetable seeds, came with sweet roasted baby carrots in an orange-carrot puree with wild fennel. Her meat course was a Strube Ranch Wagyu flatiron steak with English peas, yeast, wild flowers and onion. It was like eating cow fresh from the spa. For a finish, she chose the laurel aged Carolina Rice pudding with citrus and herbs from the restaurant's rooftop garden.

As the executive chef here is Sean Brock, the same as Husk, all of the Southern farms from which the food derived were listed on the menu.

The service here inspired lingering, so

I tried a sweet Madeira—a fortified wine digestif popular in Charleston, but from an archipelago of Portugal and carried here by merchant shipping commerce.

GAY STUFF

Before heading out for the night, hit **Leaf Café + Bar**. While not marketed as an LGBT joint, it is a favorite of the local gays, with a gay friendly staff and inclusive environment.

The gay night life is fairly wanting most nights, as there are only two gay bars downtown—Dudley's, and its sister next door, **Club Pantheon**. The crowd is mixed—young and old, men and women, and as diverse as Charleston isn't. Next door, Club Pantheon features dancing and drag shows three nights a week.

Perhaps inadvertent, LGBT visitors should take note that the only gay club there is in the parking garage of the **Charleston Visitor's Center** (charleston-cvb.com). How's that for a welcome?

Ladies wanting a ladies night should head to North Charleston to **De'ja Vu II**, the hottest (and only) lesbian bar in North Charleston. It's off of **Park Circle**. By the duck pond. Your GPS won't find it. Another gay bar option is **Club Patricks** in West Ashley.

WHERE TO START?

If you're overwhelmed by the options to visit Condé Nast Traveler's top U.S. city for 2011, ousting San Francisco after 14 years, grab a copy of Pat Conroy's novel, "South of Broad," a must read for any Charleston traveler, and visit this beautiful city in your imagination.

As the risqué-for-its-time dance named for this city suggests, there is energy here. But it demands reverence to old school rules and adhered to with a casual approach. Virtually ancient for an American city, built with money earned trading indigo, cotton and rice on the backs of the enslaved, the food here pays homage to that history. Everyone that walks its oyster-shell paths, dances with the dolphins in Charleston bay, or drinks in its thick summer air, comes away intoxicated by Charleston's charm, humbled by its story, and in love with its people. Let Charleston welcome you, too, and lavish in its warm embrace.

HOTELS

The Mills House Hotel

115 Meeting St.
millschouse.com
(800) 874-9600

Hampton Inn

345 Meeting St.
(843) 723-4000

HarborView Inn

2 Vendue Range St.
(843) 853-8439

Charleston Place Hotel

205 Meeting St.
(843) 722-0728

4 Unity Alley

(843) 577-6660
[E] unitybb@aol.com

Doubletree Guest Suites

181 Church St.
(843) 577-2644

Renaissance Charleston Historic District Hotel

68 Wentworth St.
(843) 534-0700

EATS

Husk Restaurant

76 Queen St.
huskrestaurant.com
(843) 577-2500

Eli's Table

129 Meeting St.
elischarleston.com
(843) 405-5115

Belgian Gelato

belgiangelato.com
6 Vendue Range

Amen Street Fish and Raw Bar

205 East Bay St
amenstreet.com
(843) 853-8600

Hymans Seafood

215 Meeting St.
hymanseaford.com
(843) 723-6000

Toast

155 Meeting St.
toastofcharleston.com
(843) 534-0043

Cru Café

18 Pickney St.
crucafe.com
(843) 534-2434

The Gin Joint

182 East Bay St.
theginjoint.com
(843) 577-6111

FIG

232 Meeting St
eatatfig.com
(843) 805-5900

Closed for Business Draught Emporium

453 King St
closed4business.com
(843) 853-8466

Whisk Bakery

209 Meeting St.
whiskcharleston.com
(843) 628-5954

Sticky Fingers

235 Meeting St.
stickyfingers.com
(843) 853-RIBS

Peninsula Grill

112 North Market St.
peninsulagrill.com
(843) 723-0700

Hominy Grill

207 Rutledge Ave
hominygrill.com
(843) 937-0930

BLU Restaurant and Bar

1 Center St.
bluoffollybeach.com
(843) 588-6658

Slightly North of Broad

192 East Bay St.
mavericksouth-ernkitchens.com/
slightlynorthofbroad
(843) 723-3424

Dixie Supply Bakery & Café

62 State St.
dixiecafecharleston.com
(843) 722-5650

Fuel Cantina

211 Rutledge Ave
fuelcharleston.com
(843) 737-5959

82 Queen

82 Queen St.
82queen.com
(843) 723-7591

McCradys

2 Unity Alley
mccradysrestaurant.com
(843) 577-0025

Leaf Café + Bar

15 Beaufain St.
leafcharleston.com

Dudley's

42 Ann St.
dudleysonann.com
(843) 577-6779

NIGHT LIFE

Club Pantheon

28 Ann St.
clubpantheon.net
(843) 577-6779

De'ja Vu II

Park Circle (by the Duck Pond)
dejavuuii.com
(843) 554-5959

Club Patricks

1377 Ashley River Rd
(843) 571-3435

CARRIAGE TOURS

Classic Carriage Works

classiccarriage.com

Olde Towne Carriage Company

oldetownecarriage.com

Carolina Polo and Carriage Company

cpcc.com



F.I.G. (Food Is Good)



National Park ranger Jim Majeski, a Charleston native, explains the history of Fort Sumter to tourists April 12, the 151st anniversary of the first shot of the Civil War.



WWII Aircraft carrier, USS Yorktown (CV-10), and destroyer, USS Laffey (DD-724) at Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum in Charleston Harbor.