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USA

Eat: Charleston

Brace yourself for a proper Southern feast. With buttermilk pie, spicy fried chicken, sticky barbecue ribs and Mexican-style clams on the menu, this charming South Carolina city in the Lowcountry has seriously good taste

By Audrey Gillan. Published on 18th August 2014



Butcher & Bee in Charleston, South Carolina. Image: Audrey Gillan.

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The peanuts have been boiled and are served in their damp shells, each bite salty yet sweet, soft and a complete revelation. A tray of boiled peanuts welcomes every guest at Charleston's Hominy Grill, where Robert Stehling's kitchen is a paean to Southern history and lays claim to having been at the vanguard of this city's culinary renaissance.

Barbecue and smoking are hugely important in Southern culture and the ribs here — slow smoked and served with blackstrap molasses barbecue sauce — attest to why. And that famous Hominy Grill Buttermilk Pie? Tart lemony buttermilk frouffed up into a delectable cloud so light it almost hovers above the crunchy pastry.

Provenance has become the byword in Charleston's burgeoning food scene. At chef Sean Brock's award-winning Husk, clams and oysters come by way of Clammer Dave, the grits and cornmeal are from Geechie Boy Mill and vegetables hail from Ambrose Family Farms on nearby Wadmalaw Island.

I come for Sunday brunch and find a queue out on the porch and down on the pavement. This is brunch Lowcountry-style. Butter is whipped with honey and pork fat then sprinkled with bourbon-smoked seassalt, and there are soft, sweet buttermilk rolls. Pigs' ears candied with maple are piled on a few airy Johnnycakes (cornmeal flatbreads) and sprinkled with homemade hot sauce.

In almost every restaurant, cafe and roadside shack in Charleston — or 'Chucktown' — there's an evangelism for the Southern larder and a connection straight back to the history of this city where culinary influences come from both colonists and slaves; three quarters of America's African slaves were forced through this port city that built itself on the profits of bondage.

At Dixie Supply Bakery and Cafe — an unpretentious hole-in-the-wall diner — I find all of these influences. Sweet shrimp from Wadmalaw lie on grits so light and creamy, I'm immediately converted. The most famous dish here is the State Street Biscuit, a spicy breadcrumb-fried chicken breast, over-easy egg, and provolone cheese served with homemade sausage gravy — a waistband-busting pile of wobbling greed fulfillment.

Jessica, the delightfully breezy pastry chef, brings me the famous tomato pie made from a 'secret family recipe that goes back generations'. Scarlet heirloom tomatoes are mixed with huge wedges of 'a variety of cheeses' and layered on top of crumbly pastry served with a little square of sweet potato cornbread.

A little further out from Charleston's beautiful antebellum downtown centre, I seek out Two Boroughs Larder, a restaurant kitted out like a country store. It's here I have my encounter with Clammer Dave's clams — these bivalve babies are three times the size of any I've ever seen and are served Mexican-style with a pozole verde sauce and thin slithers of radish, celery, avocado and crumbled queso cotija (Mexican hard cheese).

Divided between two rooms, shelves are lined with produce, kitchenware and craft beers — if you like the jam-jar glasses used as cocktailware, you can buy some to take home.



Mexican-style clams at 2 Boroughs Larder. Image: Audrey Gillan.

Next door is Dave's Seafood, another local secret where I'm told the fried seafood and pork sandwiches are unmissable. But I have to pass, which saddens me as much as not being able to fit in a pitstop at legendary Martha Lou's, a pink roadside shack selling what is reported to be some of the city's best fried chicken.

I do later seek out Butcher & Bee, which continues the Charleston locavore ethos, serving fat sandwiches with seasonal stuffings. But it's the sides that have the wow factor — Brussels sprouts roasted and served with bacon and apple or kale tossed with benne (sesame) seeds in a ginger dressing, or golden beets.

That night down on Rainbow Row, where candy-coloured clapboard houses look out across the Cooper River, I take one last scoop of the salty, swampy Charleston air. They call this the Holy City because of the number of churches gracing the street corners. These days the city's restaurants could be its new tabernacles — for Charleston has truly become a venerable place to worship at the altar of Southern food.

Five Charleston food finds

- 1. Charleston Saturday Farmers' Market: Head for the city's Marion Square to find seasonal produce, artisan fare and food carts offering everything from kettle corn to barbecued meats.
2. Martha Lou's Kitchen: This pink roadside shack on the outskirts of downtown serves Martha Lou Gadsen's famous fried chicken, chitterlings and macaroni pie.
3. Culinary Tours of Charleston: Take a walking tour round the city's gastronomic highlights, including chefs' kitchens.
4. Food for the Southern Soul Barbecue 'Cue-Osk: A small BBQ stand in the city market selling award-winning barbecued Jimmy Hagood's grilled meats as well as marinades and sauces.
5. Butcher & Bee: This hip hangout is open from 10am-3pm and 10pm-3am. Local chefs come for Southern sandwich sensations and pop-up nights.

Four places for a taste of Charleston

- Husk: Almost every ingredient placed on the plate at Husk comes from south of the Mason-Dixon line. Award-winning chef Sean Brock says: "If it doesn't come from the South, it's not coming through the door."
Hominy Grill: At the vanguard of Charleston's culinary renaissance is Hominy Grill, where chef and owner Robert Stehling takes you on a journey through Southern comfort classics.
Dixie Supply Bakery and Cafe: A hole-in-the-wall diner and takeaway that feeds the lunchtime crowd on a quiet street just seconds away from the well-beaten tourist track.
Two Boroughs Larder: This restaurant-cum-general store, owned by Heather and Josh Keeler, adds a global spin to local ingredients.

Prices are per person. Follow @audreygillan, 3,855 followers. Published in the September 2014 issue of National Geographic Traveller (UK)

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