

## ★travel

### CHARLESTON, S.C.

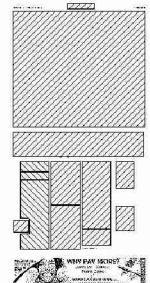


Visitors stroll on the promenade along the Battery, which offers views of Charleston Harbor on one side and, on the other side, a line of stately antebellum homes in Charleston, S.C.  
KATIE GOULD / GANNETT TENNESSEE

# Cuisine in Charleston whets appetite to visit

South Carolina city has abundance of dining options

By Graham Shelby  
For The Tennessean



**C**HARLESTON, S.C. — This place has no shortage of nicknames: the Holy City, the Palmetto City, Chuck Town. But for me, it's always had a very personal designation. Birthplace.

I was born here in 1971, but moved to Kentucky as a baby. I've made only a handful of visits over the years. The last one of any length was in 2008 for my father's funeral. Since then, Charleston has emerged as a hot travel destination, one particularly known for its food scene. The L.A. Times called the city "a food-lover's paradise." The New York Times said Charleston, whose permanent population is about 126,000, has "a concentration of world-class dining normally seen in cities five times its size."

Last fall, I got an invitation to my cousin's wedding in Charleston, so as a food lover I decided to reintroduce myself to the city one bite at a time. In Charleston the past and present seem to have reached a kind of detente, perhaps one forged over drinks and a series of good meals. There are a lifetime's worth of eating options here, trendy and traditional, upscale and lowdown. I focused on my father's favorite "Southern" foods.

## Cupcake heaven

To really understand the breadth of offerings at local chain Cupcake Down South, I sampled three different cupcakes. There is a small seating area in the store's downtown location, but I opted to take the cupcakes (\$2.99 each) back to my hotel room and evaluate them gradually over the course of my stay. This plan worked for the red velvet, Cupcake Down South's signature item, and the black bottom cupcake, a dark chocolate cake with a chocolate chip cheesecake baked inside. Those were both fine. I think. Honestly, I don't much remember them, nor any previous cupcake experience. That is, not since I ate — in one sitting — Cupcake Down South's bourbon pecan pie cupcake.

Think of it: a dessert named after

another dessert — and liquor. The menu described it this way: "Bourbon vanilla cake with chopped pralines topped with a butterscotch icing, rolled in chopped pralines." Any dessert whose description has to mention chopped pralines twice requires investigation.

Made with Jim Beam, the bourbon pecan pie cupcake is textured and mature — a masterpiece, an evolution of the form. I am so glad I ate the bourbon pecan pie cupcake, as its memory will enable me to decline thousands of empty calories at my children's birthday parties for years to come.

## Stuffed revelation

Fleet Landing looks out onto Charleston Harbor, and since I love eating with a view, they could have brought me Long John Silver's and I'd have felt at least partly satisfied.

Fleet Landing offered The Charleston Cobb Salad, which had more ingredients than I've ever seen in a salad — including black-eyed peas and was a triumph of architecture and aesthetics over flavor.

Oh, but pure eating joy arrived in the form of the Fleet Landing Stuffed Hush Puppy. About the size of a tennis ball, this puppy offers the textural delights of a crisp exterior that gives way to a gooey inside. The sweetness of the cornbread interior complemented the hearty saltiness of rock shrimp, corn, leeks, Creole tomato sauce and lobster veloute — a French cream sauce.

Stuffed hush puppies! How did I live 42 years without thinking of this, let alone eating it? As a people, we stuff peppers, mushrooms, turkeys and deer heads. We should be stuffing hush puppies. Somebody call Long John Silver's. They should order a gross of these for study. And whip up a few vats of veloute.

## Father knows best

When my father first took me to Robert's and ordered me a barbecue plate of pulled pork with hash, coleslaw and a dinner roll, I was skeptical. "Why is it yellow?" I asked, referring to the meat's golden tinge.

"That's Carolina barbecue," he said. "It's a mustard base instead of

ketchup. Try it." He was always a little pushy about his hometown, demanding that I like Charleston things that didn't always impress me. Robert's Bar-B-Que — "Home of the Super Pig!" — of North Charleston occupies the opposite of the geographic and the food spectrum from the higher-falutin' eateries on the Peninsula. Robert's is order at the counter, darlin,' and seat yourself."

I took a bite. Holy City, indeed.

One forkfull covered every tastebud I own in a coat of sweet, salty, tangy, meaty bliss. I looked at my father and the plate. He offered me one of his onion rings, which was covered in a cakey breading that was somehow soft and crisp, and allowed the onion slice to preserve its integrity.

"Pretty good, huh?" he said.

Afterward, I waddled over to the Piggly Wiggly and bought a styrofoam cooler. How else was I going to get samples of this revelation back to Kentucky? I'd hoped that my affection for Robert's would help me bond with Charlestonians and others who have a connection to the city, but I've found few other disciples. Robert's online reviews are minimal, Urban Spoon recommends Home Team BBQ and my cousin digs Duke's.

Some have intimated my devotion to Robert's is based on nostalgia or an unrefined barbecue palate. Maybe, but I don't care. It's all subjective; your seafood, sweets and barbecue

may not taste like mine, and that's OK.

Next time I'm in Charleston, I'll try any cuisine you name. I also will find my way to the Home of the Super Pig and likely order a pulled pork plate with coleslaw and onion rings. Because it's good. And because, even though I've never really lived here, in some way, it tastes like home.

## IF YOU GO

### CUPCAKE DOWN SOUTH

433 King St.,  
[www.freshcupcakes.com](http://www.freshcupcakes.com)

### FLEET LANDING

186 Concord St.,  
[www.fleetlanding.net](http://www.fleetlanding.net)

### ROBERT'S BAR-B-QUE

5120 Ashley Phosphate Road North Charleston, S.C., [www.robertsbarbque.com](http://www.robertsbarbque.com)

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Coming next week: **The beaches of Charleston**