

# Southern Exposure

Charleston's many graces aren't limited to its food.

BY JESSEN O'BRIEN

People say when painter Alfred Hutton arrived in Charleston, he took one look at the steepled skyline, towering palmetto trees and wide waterfront and immediately telegraphed his wife: "Come quickly, have found heaven." That was in 1919, but the Atlantic port is no less compelling today, arguably even more so thanks to a thriving food scene and a spate of new galleries and boutiques. In the spring, the sweet scent of cotton-colored dogwoods and pink-cheeked magnolias mingles with that of salt marshes and Lowcountry cooking. It's the calling card of this alluring coastal city, a convenient drive-to destination during your leisurely week on the South Carolina shore.

TRAVEL PLANNER  
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STORY FOR MORE DETAILS







This pineapple-shaped fountain in Charleston's Waterfront Park symbolizes hospitality.

## First, the Food

You could easily feel overwhelmed trying to choose from Charleston's many restaurants. Relax: You're bound to eat well wherever you go. Although most of the top restaurants were once crowded around the oceanfront, today trendy spots are opening up in the King Street Historic District, a landlocked corridor downtown.

Let's start with the oysters. If you've only ever had them with lemon or cocktail sauce, you're in for a revelation. Here they're steamed, stewed and even fried. At **Leon's Fine Poultry & Oyster Shop** they come chargrilled and sealed with Parmesan for a savory finish. In a former garage with twinkle lights strung from the rafters, Leon's feels like a backyard party—so go ahead, have another frozen G&T. Purists line up at **The Darling Oyster Bar** for shellfish harvested from South Carolina waters then sometimes go a little crazy and order the chowder fries.



Pulled-pork sandwich at Rodney Scott's BBQ.

For those who can't live on seafood alone, **Rodney Scott's BBQ** is up the street. Scott's the kind of chef who's been cooking forever out of sheer joy, and he's constantly stepping out of the kitchen to joke with diners. It's a tough call between the pulled pork—taken from a hog that was cooked whole for 12 hours a side—and the ribs, which Scott explains he puts directly on the grill, mopping them often for a juicy finish that slips off the bone. The highest praise may come from his wife, who came by our table for a bite of his catfish sandwich. (Says Scott: "She always does that.")

Reservations open at 10 a.m. four weeks in advance for a table at **FIG** (it stands for Food Is Good). If you didn't plan ahead, try showing up right before the restaurant opens at 5 p.m. and you might get a seat at the jovial community table. It's worth the effort: Both Mike Lata and Jason Stanhope have earned a James Beard Award for their work here. The menu changes seasonally, but the seafood—each individual flavor lovingly coaxed out—shines brightest.







A bowl of fish stew Provençal at FIG.

And then there are the lesser-known marvels. Tables book up fast at Husk Restaurant, but shrewd travelers can eat its famed burger next door at **The Bar at Husk** without a reservation. Three *b*'s—a buttermilk and benne-seed roll, plus bacon mixed into the double patty—make this burger legendary. The menu lists about 100 whiskeys, including a local pour sweetened with sorghum, and a punch using a recipe from 1792 dug up by the Charleston Preservation Society. Three blocks over, in the French Quarter, Normandy Farm Artisan Bakery transforms each evening into the speakeasy-style **Bar Normandy**. Chef Alex Lira seems determined to prove you don't need fancy equipment like a stove for a standout meal—a panini press and two induction burners do just fine. You can sit at the bar to watch it all happen and chat with Phil Cohen, who draws up an excellent wine list. Read it if only for the quotable descriptions, such as this one for a chardonnay: "Like running into your high school sweetheart 20 years later and they still got it." After dinner, it's back to the King Street Historic District for cocktails and live jazz at the wood-paneled **Charleston Grill**.

## Between Courses, Culture



Looking out at Drayton Hall, a former plantation north of Charleston.

There's a lot more to South Carolina's oldest city than fits on a plate. To begin with, there's the architecture, which is one of the finest showcases for Charleston's heritage. The grand residences downtown come in all the shades of saltwater taffy and look a bit like petticoats blown askew thanks to the three tiers of porches that often adorn the side facing the ocean. Built in 1808, the **Nathaniel Russell House** has been returned to full luster by preservationists who excavated the walls for paint chips and fabric fibers that gave clues to the original interiors. Fifteen miles north of town, **Drayton Hall** has been stabilized instead of restored, which means you can explore the former plantation in a state of resplendent ruin, its paint peeling and its rooms emptied. The Connections tour details the lives of the slaves and freed African-Americans who labored here. Back in Charleston, another antebellum touchstone delves further into this difficult and important history: the **Old Slave Mart Museum**, where the building itself tells part of the story.

So much of Charleston is dedicated to the past that finding its present





can prove tricky. To look forward, go to someone in the know: gallery owner Sarah Miller, who shows off the city's art scene on **Canvas Charleston** tours. It's a particular pleasure to discover the contemporary galleries, which have multiplied steadily over the past decade. Take Mitchell Hill, a six-week pop-up that was so popular it never closed. Today, large-scale pieces line the walls, and colorful piggy banks march in the windows. College student Neal Rice dreamed up the tiny Beresford Studios, which hosts artist talks and highlights emerging talent. You can watch painters at work at Robert Lange Studios—or play the piano, or channel your inner child on an indoor swing. And then there's Sarah's own Miller Gallery, where décor is displayed alongside pieces by upcoming and internationally acclaimed artists.



Jeff Koons-style balloon-dog piggy banks in the window at Mitchell Hill Gallery.

## The Doggy Bag

Looking to bring a piece of Charleston home? Each day, Gullah artisans sell sweetwater baskets downtown at the **Charleston City Market**, but the real fun happens during the weekend night market, when buskers play. At **Mercantile and Mash**, in the east side of the city, you can stock up on a few of the city's famed treats, like Grey Ghost cookies, benne wafers and Red Clay Hot Sauce. Plus, there are cookbooks if you want to try your own hand at Lowcountry fare.

On King Street, **Blue Bicycle Books** stocks used and rare tomes, with a selection on Charleston up front. Detour to **Mac & Murphy** for letterpressed cards, or go south to **Candlefish**, whose fragrance library holds candles with more than 100 different scents. There's a candle that smells of rosé, a candle that smells "daring, with a touch of polite restraint," even a candle that smells of Charleston. All it takes is one spark to call up ocean breezes and ruffled homes, beckoning you back to Charleston.

## Along the Grand Strand

### WEEKENDERS GUIDE: CHARLESTON, SC

#### Eat

##### [The Bar at Husk](#)

76 Queen St.; 540-577-2500; dinner for two, \$60

##### [Bar Normandy](#)

19 Broad St.; 843-789-4509; dinner for two, \$80

##### [Charleston Grill](#)

224 King St.; 843-577-4522; drinks for two, \$30

##### [The Darling Oyster Bar](#)

513 King St.; 843-641-0821; brunch for two, \$38

##### [FIG](#)

232 Meeting St.; 843-805-5900; dinner for two, \$68

##### [Leon's Fine Poultry & Oyster Shop](#)

688 King St.; 843-531-6500; lunch for two, \$68

##### [Rodney Scott's BBQ](#)

1011 King St.; 843-990-9535; lunch for two, \$30

#### Shop

##### [Blue Bicycle Books](#)

420 King St.; 843-722-2666; bluebicyclebooks.com



### Candlefish

71 Wentworth St.; 843-371-1434

### Charleston City Market

188 Meeting St.

### Mac & Murphy

74½ Canon St.; 843-576-4394

### Mercantile and Mash

701 E. Bay St.; 843-793-2636

## Explore

### Canvas Charleston

443-880-2529; tours, from \$50 a person

### Drayton Hall

3380 Ashley River Rd.; 843-769-2600; adults, \$22; children 12–16, \$10; children 6–11, \$6

### Nathaniel Russell House


51 Meeting St.; 843-724-8481; admission, \$12

### Old Slave Mart Museum

6 Chalmers St.; 843-958-6467; adults, \$7; children 5–17 and seniors 60 and up, \$5; children under 5, free

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6045

### Plantation Resort Villas

You can choose among the pools, hot tub and lazy river. 1250 U.S. Hwy. 17 N., Surfside Beach



4220

### Presidential Villas at Plantation Resort

Shares amenities with Plantation Resort Villas. 1250 U.S. Hwy. 17 N., Surfside Beach



5303

### Harbour Lights

Rooms afford breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean. 2690 Harbour Lights Dr., Myrtle Beach



0446

### The Links Golf & Racquet Club

Near downtown's nightlife and restaurants. 917 Thomas Ave., North Myrtle Beach



5948

### Shore Crest Vacation Villas II

Two-bedroom units near the boardwalk. 4709 S. Ocean Blvd., North Myrtle Beach



6777

### Wyndham Ocean Boulevard

There's miniature golf on-site, plus snorkeling nearby. 410 S. Ocean Blvd., North Myrtle Beach

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TAP TO VIEW OTHER VACATION  
OPTIONS IN AND NEAR  
CHARLESTON

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