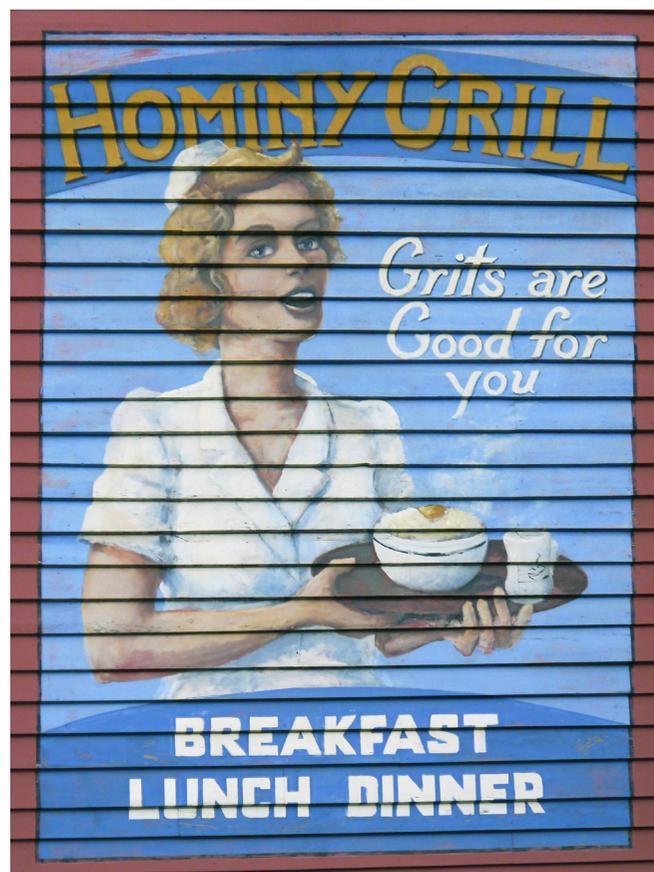


On a shoestring Charleston

South Carolina's oldest city is putting a new spin on southern classics. Go now to tuck into maple-candied pigs' ears, sweet potato cornbread and velvety she-crab soup

Words and photographs AUDREY GILLAN



pork collar Monte Cristo, topped with cheddar, sunny side-up egg, sausage and confit potato hash accompanied by a little iron pan of cheesy grits, plus biscuits with sausage gravy, and I almost have a heart attack by osmosis. With no main course more than \$16 (for Wagyu sirloin) brunch is a fabulous way to sample the best of Husk if you're on a budget. The famous cheeseburger – available at lunch in the restaurant and all-day from the bar – is just \$10.

But it's not just the high-end joints like Husk (or it's even chic-er sister **McCrary's**, mccradyrestaurant.com) that are tub-thumping for ingredient-driven cuisine. On my first day in Chucktown that same desire to use the best of the local lar

showed itself in the most unlikely of places – the **Dixie Supply Bakery and Café** (dixiecafecharleston.com), a hole-in-the-wall diner with no pretension whatsoever. Sweet shrimp from Wadmalaw lie on grits so light and creamy they

'Sweet shrimp lie on grits so creamy they convert me from terror at their texture to an immediate fan'

convert me from terror at their texture to an immediate fan. Jessica, the delightfully breezy pastry chef, brings me the café's 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, then served with a little square of sweet potato cornbread. Essentially this is the place for southern soul food – the spicy fried chicken is brined in locally-grown tea and the fried

Clams and oysters come by way of Clammer Dave, the grits and cornmeal from Geechie Boy Mill and vegetables from Ambrose Family Farms on nearby Wadmalaw Island. Provenance hits you in the face as soon as you step inside Charleston's award-winning **Husk** (huskrestaurant.com). Everything that can be doffed a cap to for its local sourcing is chalked up on a giant blackboard in the hallway of this townhouse in the city's French Quarter. If it has not been reared, picked or caught somewhere below the Mason-Dixon line, it stands a fat chance of making it through the kitchen door.

It's noon on a Sunday and there's a queue out on the porch as people wait for brunch 'Lowcountry style'. And what style. Butter is whipped with honey and pork fat then sprinkled with bourbon-smoked sea salt to spread onto soft, sweet buttermilk rolls. Pigs' ears candied with maple syrup are piled on a few airy Johnny cakes (cornmeal flatbread) and sprinkled with house hot sauce. I can't help thinking this is what Elvis would have eaten had his palate been more refined. And then they bring the crisp



Buttermilk pie

1 hour ■ Serves 8 ■ EASY

sweet pastry 350g
unsalted butter 90g, at room temperature
golden caster sugar 225g
eggs 2, separated
plain flour 3 tbsps
lemon juice 1 tbsps
nutmeg ½ tsp, freshly grated
buttermilk 250ml, at room temperature

■ Heat the oven to 190C/fan 170C/gas 5. Roll out the pastry and use to line a 22-23 cm pie tin. Fill with baking paper and beans, bake blind then cool. Turn the oven down to 180C/fan 160C/gas 4.

■ Beat the butter and sugar with electric beaters until the sugar is completely incorporated. Add the egg yolks and mix well to combine. Add flour, lemon juice, nutmeg and ½ tsp salt. With the beaters running, add the buttermilk slowly. Mix well and set aside.

■ In another bowl, whip the egg whites until they form soft peaks. Pour a small amount of the buttermilk mixture into the whites.

Fold gently to combine. Gently fold the egg white mixture into the remaining buttermilk mixture until just combined. Pour custard into the baked pie shell. Bake in the middle of the oven until the filling is browned and barely moves when the pie is jiggled, about 40-45 minutes (cover with foil if it starts to brown too much). Cool in the tin on a rack and serve warm or at room temperature. Chill any leftovers.

■ PER SERVING 414 kcal, protein 5.6g, carbs 55g, fat 19g, sat fat 10.5g, fibre 1.3g, salt 0.5g

green tomatoes come with lip-tingling pimento cheese – that may leave you waddling but most certainly won't leave you broke.

At the vanguard of Charleston's culinary renaissance is **Hominy Grill** (hominygrill.com), where chef/owner Robert Stehling takes you on a journey through southern comfort classics. First up is a tray of boiled peanuts, still in their damp shells but with the bite of a bean rather than a nut. She-crab soup is velvety, imbued with the briny flavour of the roe. The picnic platter features pickled okra – which gives a revelatory bite to the normally slimy vegetable – Lowcountry ham and beet-pickled eggs as well as that addictive pimento cheese. Barbecue and smoking are hugely important in these parts and the ribs here – slow smoked and served with blackstrap molasses barbecue sauce – attest to why. Then there's the famous Hominy Grill buttermilk pie (see recipe) with tart lemony buttermilk fluffed up into a delectable cloud so light it almost hovers above the incredibly crunchy pastry below it.

A little distance from downtown, **Butcher and Bee** (butcherandbee.com) also makes much of its use of local ingredients but with an altogether different offering. Here you'll find the grilled cheese sandwich of your dreams as well as amazing salads and sides. Hate brussels sprouts? Served with bacon, peanuts and apples, they may turn you like they did me.

At **Two Boroughs Larder** (twoboroughslarder.com) I finally 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, thin slivers of radish, celery, avocado and crumbled queso cotijo. They're lip-burningly divine. The walls of this café-cum-mercantile store are lined with Lowcountry produce, kitchenware and craft beers – if you like



the jam-jar glasses used as cocktail-ware, you can buy some to take home.

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 its street corners. These days, though, the city's restaurants could be its new tabernacles – for Charleston truly has become a venerable place to worship

Top, left to right:
sandwich at
Butcher & Bee;
Two Boroughs
Larder; Hominy
Grill's buttermilk pie.
Centre: Clammer
Dave's clams at Two
Boroughs Larder.
Above: Pecans
at Charleston
Farmers' Market

£978 PER PERSON From £978 per person per week, including six nights' half share of accommodation plus return flight. Double rooms at the Zero George Street hotel (zerogeorge.com) cost from £145. United Airlines flies from Heathrow to Charleston from £543 return (united.com). For more general info see discoversouthcarolina.com