

NASHVILLE

50 Best

RESTAURANTS

Our locally sourced, from-scratch, utterly subjective guide to the very best places to **EAT RIGHT NOW**

SHORT RIBS
from one of our
TOP 10 on PG. 56



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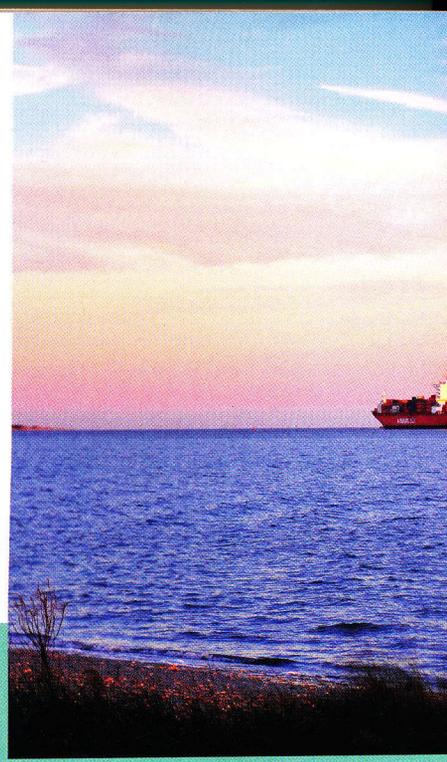
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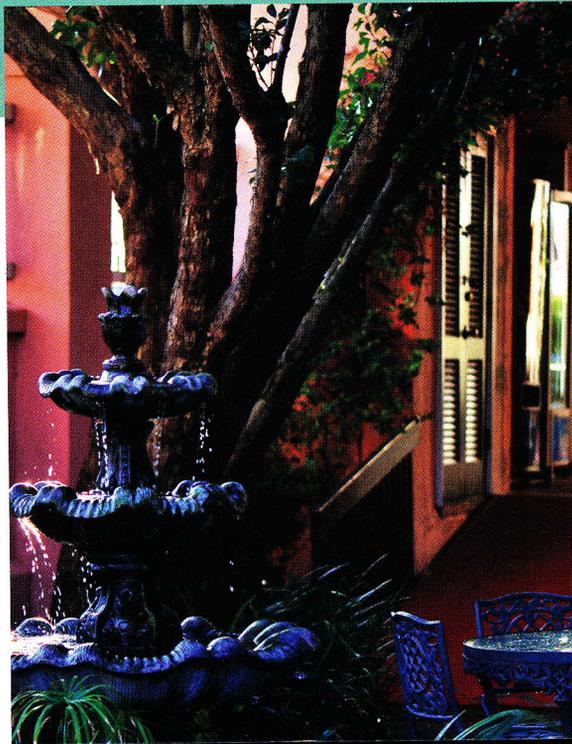
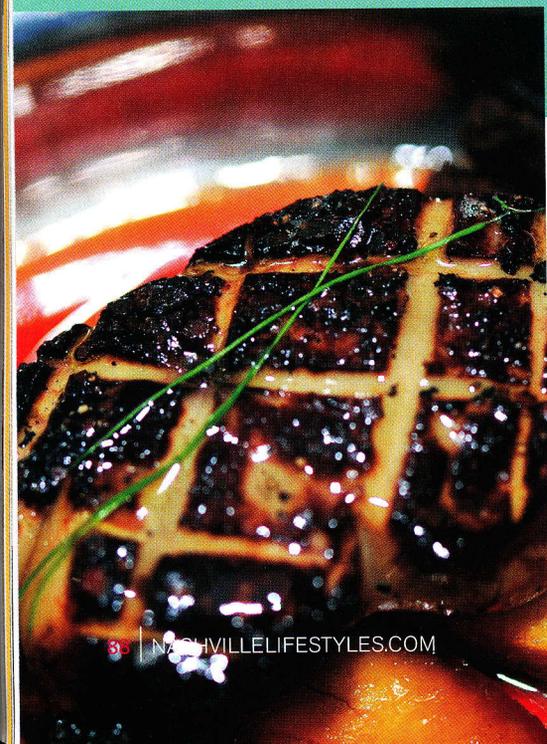
218
SLIGHTLY
NORTH
OF
BROAD
MAVERICK
SOUTHERN KITCHEN



CITY BY THE SEA

Charleston beckons with historic charm and world-class food

BY STACE STANDIFER, PHOTOS BY TIM NICHOLS





JUST LIKE NASHVILLE. Charleston has received a great deal of national press recently, especially for its dining scene. After a recent visit during which I ate non-stop for three days, I can report back that it is all well deserved. On the whole Charleston is still a few steps ahead of us on the dining scene but that just gives me a good excuse to get back. The downtown area is steeped in history, much like our own downtown Franklin, but with the added bonus of being right on the ocean. There is an element of mystery to the nightlife, a unique vibe to the shopping, and a relaxed, welcoming personality everywhere you go.

For a weekend getaway that involves unforgettable meals, shopping, and wandering quaint cobble-stoned streets, Charleston should be on your radar. And BNA now has multiple, (cheap) direct flights that can transport you to this fun, historic city in about an hour. Thanks to these affordable flights, understated elegance, and true hospitality, I've named it as my new favorite escape close to home.

STAY

Wherever you choose to stay, you will find that each neighborhood has a distinct personality. Downtown, I love the **Charleston Place Hotel**. Close to the main shopping district, it has a bustling social scene and bar. For something newer downtown check out the boutique hotel, **Zero George**. The collection of 5 historic residences joined by a courtyard has been completely updated with modern conveniences while maintaining a sense of history.

MAYBE THIS IS WHERE THE TERM "GREEN WITH ENVY" CAME FROM.

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Away from the bustle of the city, my top choice from now on will be the **Cottages on Charleston Harbor**. Here, you can rent a two-bedroom cottage complete with a full kitchen and three baths—all for about the same price as a single room downtown. These well-appointed “houses” are tastefully decorated and right on the water. Each has its own wrap-around screened-in porch and private stretch of beach. We traveled with another couple and found it roomy enough to have complete privacy, plus we made the most of the fireplace and outdoor seating for group gatherings. There's plenty to do within walking distance, which got me thinking about girls' trips, family vacations, and what a value it would be to book one of the Cottages on Charleston Harbor on a regular basis. In fact, every time I think about this find, I start to smile. Since there are only 11 cottages, plan ahead and book a reservation. As for me, I'll be planning all of my future trips around times when this treasured property has openings and make a vacation out of reading a book by the pool, lounging on the porch hammock, and taking advantage of the world-class dining, shopping, and entertainment, which is just a stone's throw away. >>>



EAT

Food is the main reason that so many people are re-discovering Charleston these days. With so many national nods to its restaurateurs, it's become a true foodie destination. Rather

than attempt to cover all of the latest and greatest (I left that to Erin Murray, see sidebar on pg. 94), I visited a few tried-and-true establishments that never disappoint.

I started this trip with a butterscotch latte at **Toast**, which is a quaint, downtown haunt that is a bit of a secret, but locals swear by it. For my seafood fix, the only choice was **Amen Street Oyster**, where original art, high ceilings, and a lively atmosphere set the stage for enjoying unbelievably fresh, cold-water oysters from at least six different regions every night. Our group ordered them by the dozen and then noshed on lightly fried fish. High expectations were set for a night at **Fig**, and chef Mike Lata did not let us down. Presentation was on point and the food was the best of Charleston on a plate.

Brunch at **High Cotton** is a local tradition, and one I was happy to sign up for. We made reservations in advance (a must) and enjoyed egg-based delicacies and house made breads while watching the line grow outside. The only lunch that trumped that meal was the little old house that is home to **Hominy Grill**. This truly southern gem features a chalkboard listing dozens of daily vegetables and entrees that come with fresh biscuits and cornbread for the table.

My dining highlight of this trip was at **Charleston Grille**, located in the lovely Charleston Place Hotel. The ambiance alone invites you to stay for hours. There is soft, live music, making it lively, but with tables that offer complete privacy. The chefs often send out tastings prior to courses and dishes like foie gras or a sweet potato gnocchi dessert are the kind that will change your palate forever. Hands down, this is a dining experience not to be missed.



NOT-TO-MISS ACTIVITIES

If you cannot get enough of the food in Charleston, you'll likely appreciate a behind-the-scenes look (and sampling) with a **Charleston Chef's Kitchen Tour**. Your guide will take you into several of the city's most famous kitchens to meet the chefs and learn a bit about the restaurant. There's also a Savor the Flavor Food Tour offered six days a week that includes a complete walking tour of landmarks and an abundance of food from various stops. (\$42 per person; culinarytoursofcharleston.com)

History Buffs and architectural enthusiasts will appreciate the expertly guided walking tours aptly named **Charleston Strolls** for viewing some of the city's most prized properties and sites. Stops include secret gardens, details on antebellum homes and historic churches, graveyards, and Civil War sites. (charlestonstrolls.com)

Patriot Point Links is by far the most coveted golf course in the area (and literally steps from the Cottages on Charleston Harbor). Golfers love the fairways and greens overlooking the water. Watching ships come in and dolphins play while working on your short game is a great way to spend the afternoon. (patriotpointlinks.com)



 CLICK FOR THE BEST OF CHARLESTON

From all of the shops and restaurants I visited to my favorite Charleston publications (which are always in the know), these are the best references for planning your trip:

CharlestonPlace.com
TheCottagesonCharlestonHarbor.com
ZeroGeorge.com
AmenStreet.com
TheGinJoint.com
HominyGrill.com
EatatFig.com
Bin152.com
HuskRestaurant.com
ToastofCharleston.com
MaverickSouthernKitchens.com
CeladonatHome.com
ShopCopperPenny.com
ShopV2V.com
ExploreCharleston.com
LocalPalateMag.com
CharlestonMag.com

 DRINK

If there's one thing this city knows well, it is the art of kicking back and enjoying a stiff cocktail or premium glass of vino. They take their happy hour very seriously, serving both locals and visitors the perfect pour every evening.

Our goal on the first night was to catch up with our Charleston friends over the creative concoctions at the **Bar at Husk**. If you haven't been, this is a must. It is inside a carriage house directly next door to the acclaimed restaurant, which means it's small—but there is nothing little about what they serve. Later, we heard about the great drinks over at **Bin 152 Wine Bar** just around the corner. Here, we could talk in a quiet environment, enjoy some rustic bread and cheese as well as a bottle of champagne to celebrate the upcoming wedding of our friends. With more than 30 cheeses and wines by the glass to choose from, it is an absolute haven for those who appreciate pairings. The environment is just as charming as the carefully chosen wine list.

As intoxicating as these first two stops on the Charleston cocktail tour were, nothing compared to the ambiance and spirit of **The Gin Joint**. Laboratory-like beakers filled with bunches of herbs sit on the small bar backed up by dozens of apothecary-style bottles of natural bitters. They take their mixing seriously—and in most cases ask you to choose from “moods” or “flavors” on a menu of words rather than forcing you to decide between their extensive list of signature splashes. The handsome bartenders put a bit of a chef's spin to each glass in this intimate, old-school style hideaway. And, to be clear—there is much more than gin here. They are known for their extensive bourbon and whiskey collections—so make sure you have a car service lined up for the ride home.

 SHOP

Antique lovers could waste an entire day at the tail end of King Street. I find myself intimidated by the vast selection so in order to find some things for my house, pronto, I looked to the concierge at Charleston Place as well as to *Charleston Magazine*, which led me to **Celadon Home**, a two-story treasure trove of home goods. There I found an expert mix of hand-carved chairs, concrete tables, gorgeous Indian fabrics, and light fixtures. It is a bit off of the beaten path (over the bridge of downtown and into Mt. Pleasant) but it was well worth the two-mile trip since I ordered and shipped multiple items home immediately. I've never found a home store with more things that I felt I just had to have.

For fashion, the shops downtown are lined with high-end designer chains—from **Gucci** and **Louis Vuitton** to the casual **Lululemon**. Where I found true solace was in a few select locally owned boutiques. I bought a few summer dresses, a winter coat on clearance, and even a few pieces of jewelry at stores like **Copper Penny** and **V2V**. Some stores were overpriced but these two were by far the best.

One tiny piece of advice to anyone visiting for the first time: Don't waste a second in Charleston's City Market. While the exterior seems grand and the concept clever, the interior is primarily filled with tourist-trap merchandise. Unless you are going in search of a gourmet shop chocolate, skip it. There is so much more to see at the city's vibrant farmer's market, which is packed with spices, honey and other gourmand items that are worth snapping up.

And that brings me back to the food. Charleston is brimming with it so I say, break the diet and truly indulge in one of the South's most delicious cities.

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A CHEAT SHEET TO CHARLESTON DINING

This winter, Charleston writer Robert Moss announced in the Charleston *City Paper* that the Holy City was passing the culinary torch to Nashville as the next hot dining city of the South. We certainly appreciate the gesture, but that doesn't mean dining in Charleston has changed. In fact, with every visit, we find a handful of new gems worth discovering. If you're headed there this spring, hit up a few of the city's hottest new tables.

—Erin Byers Murray

ALL DAY TWO BOROUGHS LARDER

Tucked along a quiet residential street, this all-day market and restaurant serves up hard-roll breakfast sandwiches plus an eclectic selection of lunch and dinner options like lamb sweetbreads, roasted carrot salad, and pho-like noodle bowls. The shelves surrounding the tables are packed with covetable goodies like serving pieces, cutting boards, and wine and beer; there are also fresh eggs and dairy in the takeout case. 186 Coming St., (843) 637-3722; twoboroughslarder.com

LUNCH XIAO BAO BISCUIT

Dishing out Asian street food in the heart of Charleston, Xiao Bao is set in an old gas station and serves up a tightly edited menu for lunch and dinner. Go for the umami-rich cabbage pancake (okonomiyaki) at lunch or bring a group to share the whole, twice-cooked chicken for dinner. 224 Rutledge Ave., (843) 743-3880; xiaobaobiscuit.com

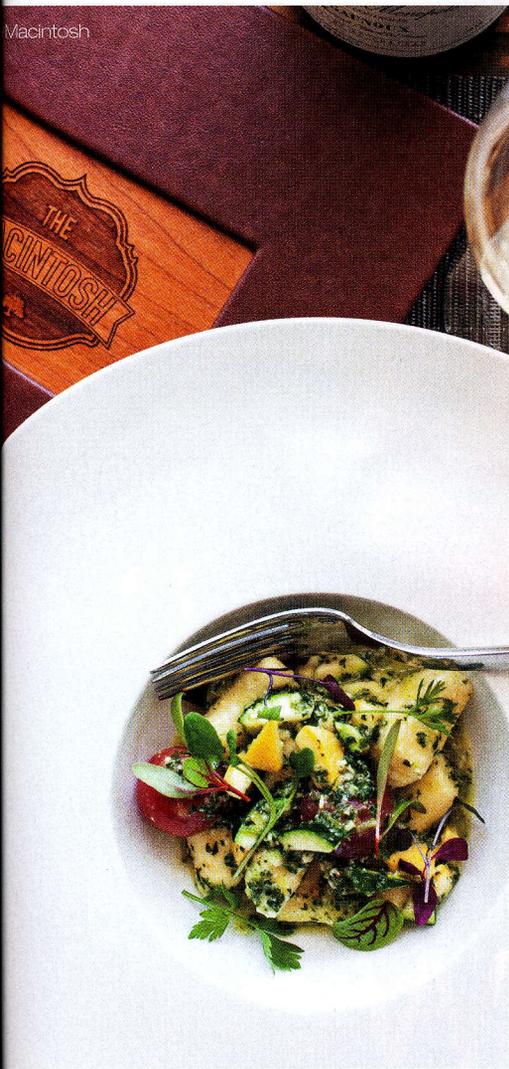
BUTCHER & BEE

Freshly made and filled with love, the sandwiches at Butcher & Bee are some of the best we've tasted anywhere. There are always inventive combos like pulled squash with barbecue cabbage and pickles or the smoked amberjack with capers and eggs, but standards like the Reuben prove they're pros at putting together the perfect 'wich. 654 King St., (843) 619-0202; butcherandbee.com

DINNER THE ORDINARY

Chef Mike Lata (his original is FIG) has placed a stunning brasserie inside an old bank, with the vault acting as the kitchen. Look for a superb oyster list and ever-changing roster of raw bar items plus a seafood-heavy mains, like trigger fish schnitzel and whole roasted bass—much of which comes directly from the S.C. coast. 544 King St., (843) 414-7060; eattheordinary.com

Macintosh



THE MACINTOSH

Along with Husk chef Sean Brock, The Macintosh's Jeremiah Bacon has received countless accolades--and for good reason. His sturdy list of starters includes a crazy delicious plate of ricotta gnudi, crispy pork belly, and flavor-packed salads plus there's a standout burger called the Mac, which is adorned with crisp Neuske's bacon and aged cheddar. The comfortable space sits at the center of the action on Upper King and is a fine alternative for the nights you can't get a res at Brock's table. 479B King St., (843) 789-4299; thamacintosh-charleston.com

FOR A TASTE OF CHARLESTON CLOSER TO HOME:

BEST CELLARS DINNER

Wunderkind chef Sean Brock hits Music City this month for the annual TJ Martell Foundation's Best Cellars Dinner on April 29. He'll be cooking alongside fellow Charlestonian (and dual-city chef)

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CELEBRATE CINCO DE MAYO!

Bob Waggoner of Watermark at the Historic Bridge Building where courses will be paired with wines from some of the most notable personal collections in the country. *For tickets and more information, go to bestcellarsdinners.com.*

THE LEE BROS. CHARLESTON KITCHEN

Cookbook authors Matt and Ted Lee put their personal spin on many of Charleston's iconic dishes (and cocktails) in this ode to their beloved hometown. Pick up a copy when the Lee Brothers are in Nashville for a signing at Parnassus Books on April 2 at 6:30 p.m. *For more information, go to parnassusbooks.net.*

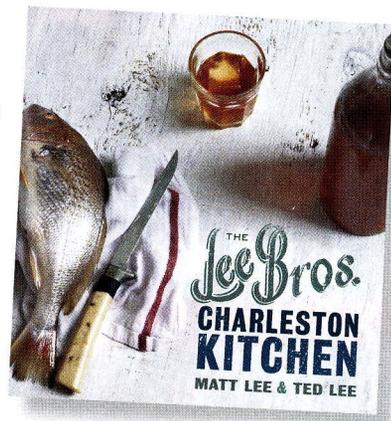


Photo by Stephanie Cashless