



CHARLESTON TOWERS

We've always loved the palmetto-lined streets and legendary Low Country cooking this city offers. But the real draw now is a booming restaurant scene that has made it the South's most exciting food destination

BY BRY S STEPHENS



Triple play
Want to induce table envy? The three-tiered shellfish *plateaux* at The Ordinary does the trick every time.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALISSA KELLER



NAVIGATOR
CHARLESTON

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EAT LIKE A CHEF

On days off, Charleston's kings of cuisine opt for real country cooking.



Ken Vedrinski
Coda del Pesce

PICK: *Bertha's Kitchen*

GO-TO DISH: Fried pork chop with tomato-okra soup. "It's simple, delicious, and they're not scared to use a little bit of salt."



Josh Keeler
Two Boroughs Larder

PICK: *Martha Lou's Kitchen*

GO-TO DISH: Fried chicken. "Martha Lou Gadsden has cooked the same dishes for 30 years at this no-frills joint. You can taste that passion in every bite."



Sean Brock
Husk Restaurant

PICK: *Fishnet Seafood*

GO-TO DISH: Fried hard-shell crab with lemon-garlic butter. "They're doing it with honesty—and that's true soul food."
—Reported by Lucy Nieboer

Ever since Sean Brock opened his celebrated Husk Restaurant

three years ago, Charleston, South Carolina, has exuded a gravitational pull for food lovers as the one city they absolutely, positively must visit. But you could argue that it wasn't until very recently that this picturesque town—gaslight lamps, cobblestone streets, centuries-old townhouses—offered the breadth of restaurants that truly make it a dining capital.

Now, in addition to the heritage Southern cuisine that Brock serves at Husk, Charleston boasts a growing number of chef-driven places, from a boisterous oyster bar to a pan-Asian hideout in a former garage. Combine this energized scene with the old-fashioned charm and comforting flavors of Low Country cooking already present, and you've got a town you really do need to visit.

LOW COUNTRY TERROIR

People notice when Mike Lata, the chef behind the beloved FIG, opens a restaurant. You should, too. His latest, **The Ordinary** [1], is anything but. The sophisticated oyster bar and seafood brasserie is located in a historic vault door offers a peek into the kitchen), and there's more white marble and tile in the soaring space than at the Acropolis. Sit at the long wooden bar and order a seafood tower that includes local oysters and clams from celebrity fisherman Clammer Dave. What Balthazar is to New York, The Ordinary is to Charleston: big, buzzy, and fun.

FINER DINER

This is a brunch town, and on Saturdays, **The Glass Onion** is the place for a Bloody Mary (with house-pickled vegetables, of course). Hangover cures include shrimp and grits, and pork country sausage with pimiento cheese and garlic bread [4]. The service is sweet and the setting is casual—think refined diner. At night, blue-plate specials include fried chicken livers and Cajun boudin ravioli with collards and potlikker.



MARKET SAVVY

Two Boroughs Larder [3] is a bit off the tourist trail, but venture out to this hybrid neighborhood restaurant-market and you'll be rewarded with the city's best all-day spot. Josh Keeler's cooking, as good as any in town, is centered around local ingredients and enhanced with global flavors. It's best for brunch or a long, lazy lunch filled with dishes like fried quail with *berbere* spice; roasted okra with curry and onion soubise [2]; and the ramen-inspired Bowl-a-Noodle with pork confit and a soft-boiled egg—all at a fair price. Every town needs a Two Boroughs Larder, but for now it's only in Charleston. »



NAVIGATOR
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SOUTHERN PIE

World-class, wood-fired Neapolitan-style pizza knows no boundaries these days. More proof can be found at the freewheeling **Extra Virgin Oven (EVO)** pizzeria in North Charleston, where perfectly blistered crusts are the canvas for toppings like summer squash and cherry tomatoes [9], and house-made sausage and mozzarella. The bakery behind the restaurant features some of the area's best

baked goods (the Speck and provolone croissants are particularly noteworthy). Locals know to stop for lunch on the way in and out of town.

THE CURE THING

The South's well-documented love of all things pork gives it a leg up when it comes to charcuterie. Case in point: the incredible cured, smoked, and cooked meats crafted by Craig Deihl and his team at **Cypress**. Bypass the main

dining room and head upstairs for a meal assembled from a revolving selection of over 80 types of country ham, *salumi*, and terrines [6]. Deihl sources pig breeds like the American Guinea hog, whose marbled meat marks the difference between the artisanal and mass stuff. Locals have the luxury of a steady supply via the restaurant's meat-share subscriptions. Out-of-towners, fear not: They'll sell you a few slices, too.

LATE-NIGHT BUZZ

Lunch is worth a visit at new-wave sandwich shop **Butcher & Bee**, but the warehouse space really comes alive after 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, with a late-night menu. You'll likely see restaurant-industry folk with six-packs on their tables (it's the city's only BYOB), scarfing down the signature burger [8] with pimiento cheese or an eggplant *banh mi*. Also look for special guest-chef pop-up dinners.

ASIAN INFUSION

Charleston might be the last place you'd expect to find textbook *mapo tofu* [5], that satisfying Sichuan dish, but that's what you'll find at **Xiao Bao Biscuit**, a hip hangout set in a converted gas station. Owners Josh Walker, Duolan Li, and Joey Ryan serve what they call Asian soul food, their take on authentic dishes from China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. This mashup means you might run across kimchi-spiked mung bean cakes alongside *paratha* bread with green curry. Wash it all down with a Toña lager.

➕ WHERE TO STAY: CHARLESTON

Steps from the Old City Market, **Charleston Place** is the ideal launching pad for exploring uptown and downtown. (Bonus: Kids love the pool with a retractable roof.) The charming, historic **Wentworth Mansion** is for those weekends when you want to leave the tots at home.



DRINK LIKE A LOCAL

You're never too far from a solid bar in these parts.

The Belmont

Upper King Street bars gets crazy on the weekends, but this den of mixology stays sophisticated. A jalapeño-cucumber gimlet [7] is a good start.

The Bar at Husk

Like Sean Brock's lauded restaurant next door, this two-story bar is deeply Southern. Choose a bourbon from the best selection in town, and pair it with one of the country's finest cheeseburgers.

The Gin Joint

Sworn off gin? This pre-Prohibition-style spot will win you back with a Maiden's Mule, made with Death's Door gin, ginger tincture, and seltzer.

The Griffon

We dare you not to have fun at this dive and chef magnet. Order from an impressive array of craft brews, or keep it simple with a shot and a beer.

For more info, see Sourcebook on page 200.