



Bitter & Sweet

By Hope S. Philbrick

We knew hot coffee and decadent sweets were a flavor match made in heaven. But we were surprised (and thrilled!) to learn the results of a study conducted at the University of Barcelona: Researchers found that pairing coffee with a sweet snack can help improve the efficiency of brain activity. So treat yourself to some caffeine and sugar and it may help you remember the way back to your hotel. At the very least it will warm your soul like nothing else, no matter how frightful Charleston's autumn weather gets.

ALCHEMY COFFEE SHOPPE

Adored by locals, this java stop is best known for its creative drink "The Alchemist," a decadent blend of chocolate, cayenne pepper, cinnamon and whipped cream. Try it, a mocha or any of the other espresso or brewed coffee drinks alongside the house specialty of oatmeal cream pie. Or perhaps one of the fresh homemade cookies, like chocolate chip, will prove more tempting. The lunch lineup is packed with yummy sandwiches, but friendly service and an artsy ambiance are always on the menu. 11 Magnolia Rd.; 843.637.3555; www.alchemycoffeeshoppe.com

BAKEHOUSE CHARLESTON

This assortment of scones, cookies, tarts, muffins, cakes and other delicacies is almost too pretty to eat. But this art is scrumptious, so why resist? Top sellers include the sweet and salty brownie that pairs

dark chocolate with salt caramel and the chocolate whoopie pies stuffed with buttercream frosting. Espressos and lattes feature an exclusive custom blend coffee that's roasted in Charleston. All treats are hand-made fresh daily and are free of preservatives. 160 East Bay St.; 843.577.2180; www.bakehousecharleston.com

CAVIAR & BANANAS

A favorite eatery with locals and tourists alike, this gourmet market and café offers an impressive selection of artisan breads and pastries plus wines, cheese, sushi, salads, sandwiches and more. Extensive variety means you could eat here every day—you may want to!—without repeating a meal. All coffees and teas are organic. Top selling drinks are chai tea lattes and iced lattes. Favorite sweets include s'mores with a house-made graham cracker crust, lemon bars,

strawberry white chocolate scones and banana pudding. 51 George St.; 843.577.7757 and 188 Meeting St.; 843.722.6465; www.caviarandbananas.com

CITY LIGHTS COFFEE

Specialty coffees are expertly prepared at this cool and relaxed hang-out that's popular with locals. We adore the personal French-press coffees, but the overwhelming best seller is the ice-cold coffee milkshake (and on steamy days you'll likely spot us happily slurping at least one!) Chocolate croissants, banana bread and any variety of cake are popular pastries. Friendly folks give the place an inviting, neighborly vibe. 141 Market St.; 843.853.7067

CUPCAKE

Daily menus offer up nine flavors among the 45 cupcake options served throughout the year—be glad the choice has been narrowed down since it's not easy to choose between creations like red velvet, banana butterscotch, cinnamon swirl, creamsicle, mint chocolate chip and more. But relax, you can't go wrong with any of these delightful cupcakes. They're all baked fresh daily and are topped with swirling clouds of icing that reach gravity-defying heights. 433 King St.; 843.853.8181; www.freshcupcakes.com

HOPE & UNION

This is what every neighborhood coffee shop aspires to be: a simple, relaxing space where you can feel right at home while sipping on some top-quality java. Coffee drinks at this cozy place are all hand-crafted by the cup. The menu includes an array of single-origin coffees. Nibble on a cookie, scone, croissant or other treat while sitting in the airy dining room and say "Mmmmm." 199 St. Philip St.; 843.922.1023; www.hopeandunion-coffee.com

KUDU COFFEE HOUSE

A favorite hang-out of local college students and hipsters, this impressive selection of coffee and craft beer also attracts visitors. One

popular drink is the original "Shakarati," a mix of espresso, honey, raw sugar and half-and-half shaken with ice and strained into a glass to prevent further dilution. Of course, if you prefer a traditional cappuccino with your croissant, muffin, bagel or quiche, that's fine, too. 4 Vanderhorst St.; 843.853.7186; www.kuducharleston.com

SUBLIME PIES & CAKES

Award-winning baker Tamlyn Willard has partnered with Charleston Cookie Company to sell her famous desserts on James Island. Dirty key lime pie—a slice of key lime pie dipped in dark chocolate and served on a stick—is a top seller, perhaps because it's expected you'll take a bite as soon as it reaches your hand. Also popular are the four cheesecake flavors: key lime, chocolate, chocolate raspberry and original plain. 1750 Signal Point Road on James Island; 843.225.5463 (Some products are also available at Caviar & Bananas.)

SUGAR

"The chocolate chip cookie has to be the best seller, but the oatmeal raisin and ginger cookies come in as a close second," says co-owner Bill Bowick. This tiny bakery is also revered for its custom cakes, Huguenot tortes (a local specialty) and daily specials like Thursday's Lady Baltimore cupcakes, which are made with sherry-soaked figs and raisins and topped with meringue icing. Any selection, including tender scones and muffins, will have you lapping up every last crumb. 59 1/2 Cannon St.; 843.579.2891; www.sugarbake.com

WILD FLOUR PASTRY

Pastry Chef Lauren Mitterer selects top-quality ingredients (from local sources as often as possible) to craft her specialty pastries and desserts. Menu specifics change with each season but you really can't go wrong with any of her sweet or savory turnovers, tarts, muffins, quiches, coffeecakes, cinnamon rolls or variety of cookies. 73 Spring St.; 843.327.2621; www.wildflourpastrycharleston.com