

CHARLESTON CHEWS



Lobster dish at Charleston Grill



Seafood club sandwich at Palmetto Café

Low-country cuisine in Charleston, S.C.



Charleston Grill

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Low-country cuisine is not fussy and pretentious. It's roll-up-your-sleeves-and-eat fare with quirky names like hoppin' john, she-crab soup and Huguenot torte. Fun to say, sure, but more importantly, the stuff tastes great.

Culinary styles grow out of the foods available in a region and the people who live there—their taste preferences, cultural practices, cooking skills and influences. In the low country, which includes the coastal regions of Georgia and South Carolina, the diverse population of French, Spanish, Scottish, English, African and Native American people had ready access to rice, seafood and abundant produce. In the port city of Charleston, “We still have these influences rooted in and expressed through our cuisine,” says Executive Chef Frank Lee of Maverick Southern Kitchens.

Heavy on seafood sourced from the ocean and rivers, low-country cuisine is also loaded with “rice, slow-cooked vegetables and delights that can only be properly prepared by frying,” says Douglas Beard, vice president of food service for Middleton Place Foundation. “Gullah culture, sweetgrass baskets, oyster and hog roasts, the smell of salt marsh at low tide; all of these things and an innumerable amount of others make up low-country traditions.”

But cuisine evolves, and low country is no exception. On today's Charleston menus alongside traditional favorites like crab cakes, and shrimp and grits are dishes like grilled barbecue tuna (at Slightly North of Broad), duck confit and dirty grits with baby turnips and bacon-sage gravy (at Charleston Grill), and lump crab and avocado salad with grilled chayote squash (at Palmetto Café).

Charleston's cuisine is “definitely influenced by” its geography, says Executive Chef Michelle Weaver of Charleston Grill. “We live on shrimp and crab predominantly. The rice fields are big influences.” But that has not stifled her creativity. Her menu features a wide range of dishes divided into four quadrants: cosmopolitan, Southern, pure and lush. The Southern category includes low-country standards—“we'll always have crab cake,” says Weaver—as well as items like pan-seared foie gras, skillet-seared flounder and grilled Kurobuta (Berkshire) pork.

Charleston continues to draw new restaurateurs. Matt Lewis and Renato Poliafito recently chose the city for a second location of their New York bakery, Baked. “I fell in love with the architecture, the people and the food,” says Lewis. “I think Charleston has a great culinary scene. There is a great awareness of local and seasonal ingredients, and the residents and tourists alike are looking for less ‘corporate,’ more ‘real’ dining alternatives.”

“We're trying to source as much local and outside the industrial food chain as we can,”

says Lee. “So far we've been quite successful at it, and so have many restaurants in Charleston—places like High Cotton, Fig, McCrady's, Anson, Cypress, Carolina's all source locally from champion farmers and local producers and have created vibrant, modern low-country cuisine. We've got a hell of a restaurant scene here! Extremely dedicated, talented chefs using all their skills and techniques in a modern way.”

Yet history is not lost: “The great chefs reach into tradition to find simple recipes that glorify our home-grown ingredients,” says South Carolina food writer Becky Billingsley.

In addition to local, sustainable and organic ingredients, history is on the menu at Middleton Place, where the mission is to “interpret history by serving many ingredients and dishes authentic to the area and culture of the antebellum low country,” says Beard. “While using true recipes and ingredients found during that time would not satisfy present palates—not everyone likes pickled calf's head these days—we do feature items such as collar greens, hoppin' johns, West African peanut soup, catfish, country ham, quail, she-crab soup and more.” Tradition underscores the lunch and dinner menu, though dinner presentations get a more contemporary spin.

“Our historic city has been preserved and our cuisine is an extension of that historic culture,” says Lee. “But really I'm more interested in looking forward.” **SP**

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO EAT

- **Baked Charleston**
160 E. Bay St.
843-577-2180
www.bakednyc.com
- **Charleston Grill**
224 King St.
843-577-4522
www.charlestongrill.com
- **Middleton Place**
4300 Ashley River Road
843-556-6020
www.middletonplace.org
- **Palmetto Café**
205 Meeting St.
843-722-4900
www.charlestonplace.com
- **Slightly North of Broad**
192 East Bay St.
843-723-3424
www.mavericksouthernkitchens.com
- **Tristan**
55 S. Market St.
843-534-2155
www.tristandining.com

WHERE TO STAY

- **Charleston Place**
205 Meeting St.
843-722-4900
www.charlestonplace.com

WHEN TO GO

- **Charleston Food + Wine Festival**
March 4-7, 2010
www.charlestonfoodandwine.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Charleston Area SC Convention & Visitors Bureau**
800-774-0006
www.charlestoncvb.com