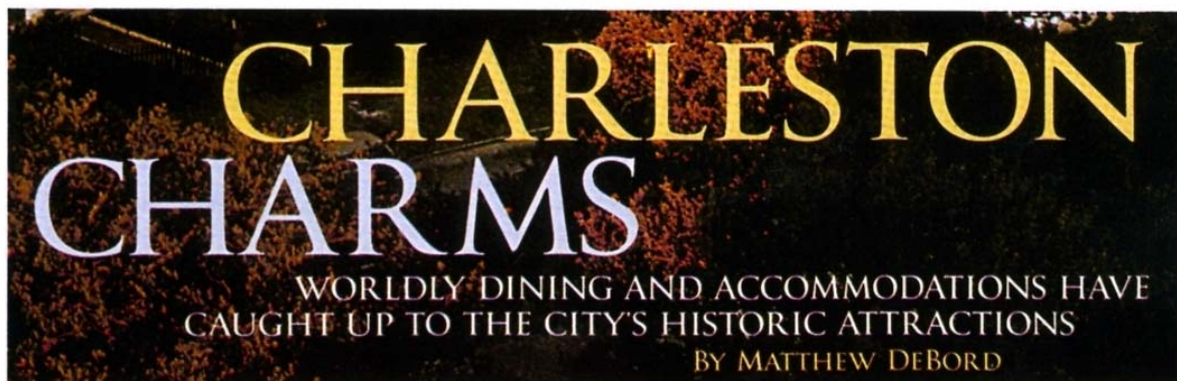


Wine Spectator

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WHERE TO EAT

BLOSSOM CAFÉ

171 E. Bay St. Telephone (843) 722-9200 Open Lunch and dinner, daily; brunch, Sunday Cost Entrées \$14-\$24 Award of Excellence

This outwardly unassuming veteran is where plenty of real Charlestonians go for dinner, after the tourists have vacated East Bay Street.

On a bustling Saturday evening, you'll find three or four dates in varying stages of success, a boisterous 30th-birthday party and a dozen junior high school boys, attired in blue blazers and ties, who eye their dinner companions, all in black formal dresses, far more nervously than they do the menu.

Not that there's any reason to be anxious about the food, which represents Charleston's best effort at contemporary American-Mediterranean fare. A fantastically appetizing carpaccio of beef is pounded to micron thinness and dressed with arugula and a zigzag of mustard. Smoked duck is fat-crusting and fabulous.

The 150-selection wine list is canted far less toward Italy than one might anticipate. Nevertheless, there is a "Mediterranean" subsection, starring super Tuscan Ornellaia 1998, but making room as well for a neat clustering of Barolos, Chiantis and Brunellos.