

CHARLESTON LOWCOUNTRY CUISINE

Culinary destination

Chef's Kitchen Tours, Wine and Food Fest lure foodies to town.

By Tracey Teo
For the AJC

Charleston, S.C., has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the hottest culinary destinations in the South, and it doesn't take many tasty meals for visitors to acknowledge it's well deserved.

James Beard-nominated chefs and restaurants are as plentiful as palmetto trees along East Bay Street, a hub for some of the city's most widely heralded dining establishments. Whether diners choose the region's distinctive Lowcountry cuisine or the cosmopolitan flavors more commonly found in larger cities, it all tastes better in elegant, historic Charleston.

The Charleston Chef's Kitchen Tour, a behind-the-scenes look at the city's top chefs and their restaurants, is a fun way to get acquainted with the vibrant food scene — especially this time of the year, when Charleston is abuzz with preparations for the seventh annual BB&T Charleston Wine and Food Festival, running March 1-4.

Barbara Jean's

At Barbara Jean's, the first restaurant on the tour, curious foodies savor samples of hearty, old-fashioned cheese grits as they listen attentively to a tour guide named "Hoon." He traces the culinary history of Charleston from the days when South Carolina was a colony to modern times, providing some perspective on why Charleston eats the way it does.

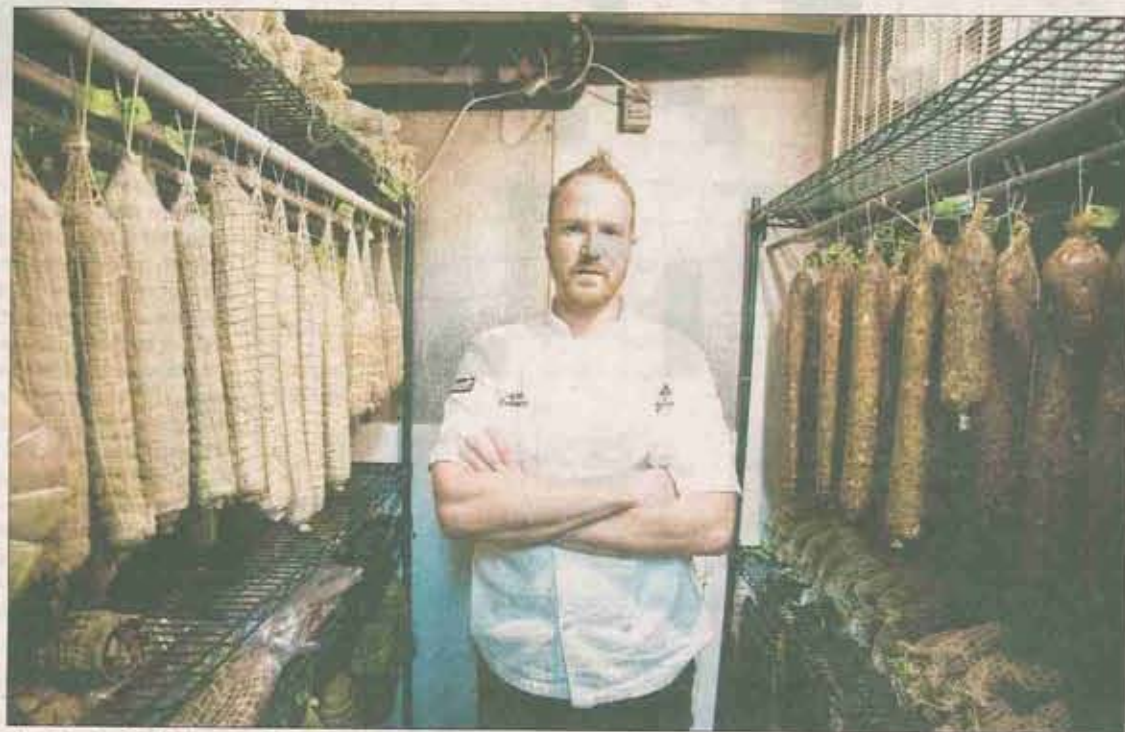
"Lowcountry" refers to the fertile farmland, marshes and tributaries that stretch along the South Carolina coast from Georgia's Savannah River to Pawley's Island, so it's no wonder fresh-off-the-boat seafood is a Lowcountry staple.

From the late 17th century until the end of the Civil War, Charleston was one of the world's largest rice producers. Rice is still the basis for many Lowcountry dishes such as pilau (pronounced PER-low), a stewlike dish usually cooked with chicken or seafood. Pilau is to Charleston what gumbo is to New Orleans, and there are about as many variations.

Hoon encourages everyone to finish up the last of their grits because there are more stops on this gastronomic odyssey.

Magnolias

When the tour arrives at Magnolias, specializing in upscale Southern cuisine, executive chef Don Drake is ready with trays of "Charleston caviar," more commonly known as pimento cheese. Drake has a talent for putting a sophisticated spin on humble Southern dishes, and his gourmet version of pimento cheese is made with sharp white cheddar, grated Parmesan, fresh roasted red peppers, Spanish olives and Duke's mayon-



Chef Craig Deihl shows off the aging room at Cypress, a restaurant on East Bay Street housed in an almost 200-year-old building. Hospitality Management Group Inc.



The patio at Blossom is the perfect place to catch a breeze off the Charleston Harbor. Hospitality Management Group Inc.



Magnolias chef Don Drake enjoys educating tourists on the Chef's Kitchen Tour about Southern cuisine, including his own "Charleston Caviar," more commonly known as pimento cheese. Wesley K.H. Teo

naise.

Drake believes in following Southern cooking traditions, but he's not slavishly tied to them.

"We try to keep true to our roots, but we always leave the door open for a more modern interpretation of a dish using new techniques or products," Drake said.

Like the rest of Charleston's best chefs, Drake is gearing up for the Wine and Food Festival. Chef Tory McPhail from Commander's Palace in New Orleans is bringing his Creole creations to the Lowcountry, and Drake is looking forward to playing host to him at Magnolias.

"We have such incredible talent that comes to the city for the festival, from the wine makers to the guest chefs to the festival VIPs," Drake said. "I always look forward to the event."

Blossom

As Hoon leads the tour into Blossom's sunny interior, a delicious-smelling lamb sausage pizza liberally sprinkled with sun-dried tomatoes is deftly removed from a wood-burning oven in the open kitchen. Everyone clamors for samples — in a polite way, of course. This is Charleston.

Blossom is a seafood restaurant that almost defies categorization, which is part of

its charm.

On the one hand, executive chef Adam Close expertly prepares the expected Lowcountry dishes: sherry-doused she crab soup, shrimp and grits, buttermilk fried oysters, and steamed mussels.

On the other hand, customer favorites also include Mediterranean-inspired dishes with Close's signature, house-made pasta.

The intimate courtyard is a corridor for soft breezes off Charleston Harbor, but if the weather isn't conducive to al fresco dining, indoor seating provides a view of Close's carefully choreographed culinary show in the exhibition kitchen.

Close said he is looking forward to showcasing some of his creations at the Wine and Food Festival's opening night party March 1.

"I enjoy the challenge as well as the chance to be in a room cooking next to other

local chefs," Close said. "It's a lot of work before and during the party, but well worth it."

Cypress

It may be housed in a nearly 200-year-old building, but Cypress restaurant, with its modern decor and funky light fixtures, is the epitome of sleek and chic. A gleaming, three-story wine wall showcases vintages from around the globe, so no matter which Lowcountry dish they are craving, diners are sure to find a wine that perfectly complements their choice.

Chef Craig Deihl, a 2010 James Beard nominee for best chef in the Southeast, is a rising star in the culinary world, expertly preparing globally influenced Southern food. He takes pride in a seasonal menu that uses ingredients from local farmers and fishermen.

Deihl has received accolades for his piece de resis-

If you go

Stay at Marriott Courtyard Charleston Waterfront:

This property offers sweeping views of the Ashley River. It is 1.5 miles from historic downtown Charleston, home to many of the city's most popular restaurants. Rates start at \$299 during the BB&T Charleston Wine and Food Festival. 35 Lockwood Drive. 843-722-7229, www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/chscy-courtyard-charleston-waterfront.

Culinary Tours of Charleston.

The Chef's Kitchen Tour is 9:30 a.m.-noon Fridays. It's worth noting that the executive chef is not necessarily in the kitchen on every tour, but visitors still get to see where all the culinary magic comes together. Tickets are \$42 each. Advance purchase required. 40 N. Market St. 1-800-918-0701, www.culinarytours-ofcharleston.com.

BB&T Charleston Wine and Food Festival, March 1-4.

The heart of the festival is the Culinary Village in Marion Square. There are many events connected to the festival and prices vary. www.charlestonwineandfood.com.

Barbara Jean's specializes

in seafood and home-style Southern cooking. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees start at \$10. 99 S. Market St. 843-637-3635, www.barbarajeans.com.

Magnolias is open for lunch,

dinner and Sunday brunch. Dinner entrees start at \$19. 185 E. Bay St. 843-577-7771, www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com.

Blossom is open for lunch,

dinner and Sunday brunch. Dinner entrees start at \$19. 171 E. Bay St. 843-722-9200, www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com.

Cypress is open for dinner

only. Entrees start at \$22. 167 E. Bay St. 843-727-0111, www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com.

tance, a charcuterie plate, and the culinary tour is treated to samples of house-made lamb bacon.

Deihl particularly loves the challenge of making head cheese, a European-style cold cut made from the meat of a pig's head, but he admitted the name can be turn-off to some.

"The only scary thing about head cheese is the name. We now call it 'rustic pork terrine,'" Deihl said with a laugh.

After thanking the Cypress staff, the epicureans pour back out onto Bay Street. Their furrowed brows and intense conversation may lead passersby to think they are trying to solve some major problem — but they are really just trying to decide where to have dinner.

Charleston is a five-hour drive from downtown Atlanta on I-20 East.