

Mercury Lifestyle

Historic pleasures in dining are new again, Part I

By Peg Moore

One of the most fascinating predictions about food in 2014 recently appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*. The article "Cooking Backward" reported that "yesterday's recipes are the next big thing." However, Charleston was surprisingly omitted from this important national survey of "gifted toques quietly engrossed in old cookbooks."

What the *Journal* sees as the next thing has been happening here since the early 1990s, when properly ground heirloom hominy grits became available — what used to be a tasteless breakfast dish was transformed into a popular dinner entrée at our best restaurants. Shrimp and grits lured the acclaimed food critic Craig Claiborne to Charleston in 1992.

Claiborne wrote glowingly of delicious meals in Magnolias, Fulton Five, Anson, Louis' Charleston Grill, Carolina's and Million (where Frank Lee of SNOB and Frank McMahon of Hank's were both cooking in the early 90s). These restaurants led Charleston's culinary renaissance.

Magnolias

Magnolias has been consistently popular since it opened in 1990. Donald Barickman, now on the faculty of the Culinary Institute of Charleston, was the restaurant's first chef and introduced such tasty dishes as in-house pimiento cheese and potato chips, buttermilk fried chicken, shellfish and grits, pan-fried catfish and of course, those famous Down South egg rolls,



Chef Frank Lee of S.N.O.B.

which are still on the menu.

Current executive chef Donald Drake became sous chef of Magnolias in 1991 with impressive experience that included a degree from the Culinary Institute of America and working for the acclaimed 4-star Quilted Giraffe in New York.

The late Tom Parsell, who opened Magnolias, was a serious locavore and promoted local ingredients and traditional recipes. He even geared the hours to allow for that traditional 3 o'clock dinner — Magnolias is open seven days a week, staying open between brunch or lunch and dinner. To celebrate 25 years, the restaurant is having the beautiful interior refurbished — it will still reflect fine dining in the Charleston tradition with classically elegant, not trendy, furnishings. The back wall will have an upholstered banquette and

an antique mirror.

Southern cooks inspired Frank Lee at SNOB

As chef/partner in Maverick Kitchens, Frank Lee has been a leader in our culinary renaissance since the opening of SNOB in 1993. "What influenced me has been not so much cookbooks, but family and their cooks," he commented. Frank's great-aunt had a Gullah cook, Daisy Smalls — "She taught me about making gumbos, cooking fish on the bone, digging clams, making cobbles, creole dishes. I also watched Viola, a Jamaican who cooked for my 'adopted' grandmother Phyllis Mobley. Every Sunday we had formal sit-down dinners with wild duck, quail, venison, quail baked in rice, an eggplant casserole — mine is never as good as hers."

Frank uses old cookbooks more for

ingredients —

"measurements and techniques can be hard to understand." He's found "Joy of Cooking," "The Carolina Housewife," "La Repertoire de la Cuisine" and "Charleston Receipts" useful. Working for Jovan Trbojevic, who owned the two top restaurants in Chicago, was a major influence: "He told me to make people happy, not to worry about margins or the press."

To feast on dishes that showcase Frank's style of combining local ingredients with his expertise in French techniques and his respect for traditional flavors, try the barbecue tuna, shrimp and grits, sausage-stuffed quail with butter beans or the New York strip with beef and bacon sauce.

Hominy Grill - A Restaurant of This Place

When Robert Stehling says, "I want this

restaurant to be of this place," his passion sounds more like that of preservation activists fighting to protect our historic district from discordant architecture. Historic recipe traditions have guided Robert's menus since he opened Hominy Grill in 1996 — "It's who we are." The name of the restaurant was inspired by "200 Years of Charleston Cooking," which noted that Charlestonians refer to grits as "hominy." An intense study of culinary history has resulted in such delicious creations as the popular shrimp and okra beignets he created. Beignets reflect our French influence.

Do not miss recent additions to the menu. Pine Bark Stew is similar to a dish known as "muddle" in North Carolina, the Carolina version of bouillabaisse. Popular in the 19th century, shrimp bog is like a pilau, which Robert cooks like a risotto, adding water as needed.

Robert is surprised some local menus appear to be more focused on novelty — that intense respect for local ingredients does not include using them in traditional ways. In his extensive library, "American Cookery of 1789," "The Carolina Rice Kitchen" and Escoffier have been helpful.

Is novelty for the sake of novelty running its course?

"There was nothing on the menu that sounded good, just weird flavor combinations," said a local foodie about the menu of a new restaurant.

Novelty is too often

mistaken for creativity by those in the arts, whether chefs or architects. The *Journal* noted, "In a culinary landscape filled with Szechuan pastrami and cronuts, it can feel like our chefs are slaves to novelty." In a city like Charleston, locals are apt to recoil from artistic efforts that defy tradition in food or architecture.

When Clemson's proposed building for Charleston's historic district was shown to Clemson graduates, Tommy Thornhill reports there were audible gasps of disbelief. Indeed, the design violates the BAR ordinance which calls for "the continued construction of buildings in the historic style and general harmony as to style, form, color and proportions." Thoughtful Charleston leaders, media and organizations oppose the design. A young architect has pointed out the design is not only behind the times but is unsustainable, will need mechanical ventilation 24/7 and have moisture problems.

Like architecture, food needs to be tempting, not just different." Bon appétit!

Peg Moore may be reached at mooremeh@comcast.net

Hominy Grill — 207 Rutledge Avenue. 937-0930.
Magnolias — 185 East Bay Street. 577-7771.
SNOB — 192 East Bay Street. 723-3424.

Do not miss the Charleston Wine + Food Festival, March 6-9!