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CHOICE TABLES

A Modern Southern Cuisine In Charleston

By BRYAN MILLER

CHARLESTON, S.C., is no stranger to revolutions. In 1776 it fought off a British fleet in Revolutionary War (only to be conquered four years later). In 1860 South Carolina signed the first Ordinance of Secession from the Union in Charleston; the next year South Carolinians fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, igniting the Civil War.

In recent years another, far more benign, revolution has swept this stately port city: a gastronomic one. Like many Southern centers, Charleston has seen an influx of young talent from leading restaurants and cooking schools around the country. At the same time home-grown chefs are on the ascendency, looking at their regional cuisine with a contemporary eye.

Charleston is in the heart of what is called the Low Country, an expanse of sea marshes, tidal tributaries and fertile farmland along the South Carolina coast. Shrimp, oysters, rice, tomatoes, field greens, okra — all flourish in this warm, moist climate. Many restaurants in Charleston specialize in Low Country cooking, which is an amalgam of the various cultures that have settled here at one time or another over the city's tumultuous history. Thus there are dishes with French, Spanish, African, American and Caribbean influences.

Charleston's restaurant renaissance is relatively new. "It started about five or six years ago," said Louis Osteen, perhaps the best-known chef in the city, who runs Louis's Charleston Grill in the Hotel at Charleston Place. Mr. Osteen attributes the culinary boom to a greater interest in regional cooking among chefs, and a more sophisticated clientele as Charleston grows. He specializes in "straightforward American

BRYAN MILLER, a former restaurant critic for *The Times*, writes about food.



Wade Speers for The New York Times

Magnolias, home of Southern egg rolls and grits cakes.

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Old South, New Southern Cuisine

In Charleston, S.C., young chefs are giving regional fare contemporary treatment.

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Magnolias

Another well-known chef in the Low Country and beyond is Donald Barickman of Magnolias in the historic district. His cooking might be called contemporary Southern with accents of the Low Country.

Magnolias looks like a smart bar and grill on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan — done in black and white, with soft track lighting and oversized paintings of magnolias on walls.

One appetizer that, inexplicably, is found all over Charleston is the Southern egg roll. Mr. Barickman executes it better than most: a crisp egg roll stuffed with spicy tasso, collard greens and minced chicken, served with moderately hot red pepper purée, spicy mustard sauce and sweet peach chutney. A more orthodox starter is the soothing seared grits cake smothered with zesty tasso gravy.

Wine considerations with dishes as disparate as these can be tricky. Magnolias' California-oriented list carries some quality sauvignon blancs for the spicy selections, and plenty of chardonnays to accompany more earthy Southern fare, all at reasonable prices.

Main courses are more straightforward. On the homey side there is a steaming chicken pot pie bursting with a heavenly combination of corn, shiitakes, peas, sage gravy and sliced chicken under an onion-pastry crust. Among the more au courant creations is a rare grilled dolphin fillet over al dente black-eyed peas and sautéed greens with a charred tomato vinaigrette.

Servers, who are unremittably cheerful and competent, revel in walking you through the desserts. If I had to pick one it would be the awesome almond-macadamia, chocolate-chunk bread pudding with white chocolate ice cream. If anything could have slowed the Union tide, this is it.