

# Oyster Pointers



## Fine dining flourishes where fast-casual falters

By Peg Moore

The fast-casual craze may be diminishing the pleasures of dining across America, but Charleston still has many opportunities for gracious dining. Historically, Charleston dining has been the opposite of fast-casual. Even though some people currently put up with having to perch on a bar stool for a meal, dining slowly and formally has a long history here.

The “three o’clock dinner” is a historic Charleston tradition — think of the famous book with the same title written by Josephine Pinckney in 1945.

This leisurely dining in the middle of the afternoon was inspired by our European heritage. It continues to be popular in modern Europe — one of my delicious memories is lunch at Table de Joel Robuchon. We feasted for nearly four hours on the ten-course tasting menu. There were surprising combinations to savor, not just discuss. Many came with foam, which was the fashion then. Foie gras was enhanced with fig marmalade. There was a memorable pigeon dish, a crab and avocado jelly.

In a warm climate it does make sense to get serious work done early in the day. Lunch menus in Charleston’s best restaurants focus on popular heritage dishes with local seafood and classics such as chicken country captain instead of fast-casual national trends such as tacos and burgers. One of the nicest restaurants for a peaceful lunch or dinner is Magnolias.

### Magnolias

Magnolias has been packing in both visitors and locals since the day it



CHARLESTON MERCURY ARCHIVES

White tablecloth dining is still standard at places like Magnolia’s.



CHARLESTON MERCURY ARCHIVES

Charleston Grille, a bastion of local fine dining.

opened in 1990 with chef Donald Barickman, an experienced fine-dining chef. He had been sous chef of the legendary fine dining restaurant The Wine Cellar and later executive chef of Perdita’s.

Don Drake, the culinary arts director, joined Magnolias in 1991 and now oversees the kitchen. Don came to Charleston with an impressive fine dining past, having trained under Barry Wine of the renowned Quilted Giraffe in New York.

The Quilted Giraffe restaurant was obsessed with achieving elegance in every detail. They even grew special flowers for the restaurant. They sought out local ingredients a decade before it became fashionable. The Manhattan establishment is said to have epitomized refined American dining as it was coming into its own during the 1980s. Regulars included celebrities such as Andy Warhol, Henry Kissinger and Woody Allen.

We watched the food revolution happen in New York. When we

moved to Charleston in the 90s, it was fascinating to watch it happen here, too.

Magnolias restaurant was an important leader of Charleston’s food revolution. It was one of the first to focus on local ingredients and was praised for its sophisticated creations described as new southern food.

The “Down South egg roll” is still a popular dish. It is a delicious creation with collard greens, chicken, tasso ham, red pepper puree, mustard and peach chutney. I can never resist the house-made potato chips either. You can depend on enjoying such classics such as pan-fried chicken livers, meat loaf, fried chicken and shellfish over grits.

### Charleston Grill

Charleston Grill is a perfect destination for serious fine dining and celebrations. It was preceded by Louis’ Charleston Grill. Louis Osteen was one of the acclaimed chefs of the early 1990s who put Charleston on the national map.

The culinary world was startled and charmed when he transformed grits into an upscale dinner dish instead of just a breakfast standard. Louis was among Charleston’s best chefs to serve stone ground grits without preservatives from Falls Mills at a time when such grits were not widely available.

When writer Craig Claiborne visited Charleston in the early 1990s, shrimp and grits was a dish he especially wanted to taste. He reported that the Prince of Wales feasted at Charleston Grill on risotto with local shellfish and mushrooms and that Louis served the prince’s favorite dessert of mango ice cream and truffles.

After Louis, the restaurant became simply “Charleston Grill” with the talented chef Bob Waggoner. Michelle Weaver, who trained under Bob, oversees the Charleston Grill kitchen now and continues to produce memorable meals.

A seriously foodie couple recently raved

about a birthday celebration at Charleston Grill. They feasted on yellow gazpacho, sea bass and pineapple upside down cake with sorbet.

Charleston Grill is one of the few places where you can have a modest-sized meal in an ambience that makes you feel it is a celebratory feast. The intimate bar area has cushy booths and tablecloths. Live music adds to the festivity.

We once spent a day at the airport waiting for our plane to be fixed, which never happened. Instead of being flown to Atlanta, we returned to town and drowned our sorrows at Charleston Grill.

### Fine dining will survive the fast casual assault

One of the saddest restaurant losses this year is Cypress, which celebrated Charleston traditions with French food and tablecloths, even in the second floor bar area. The talented Aaron Diehl was one of the first local chefs to make charcuterie in Charleston. His menu included other French

classics celebrating our French Huguenot heritage. The loss of Cypress does not signal the end of fine dining here, however.

The end of fine dining has been predicted before, but it never happens. In New York, where culinary trends begin, Augustine and Le Coucou are among new restaurants that are upscale and receiving rave reviews.

Before the influx of gastropubs and the popularity of fast casual, Charleston’s culinary identity was clearer. Restaurant Million was setting the standards in the 1990s. Those standards had evolved through the decades beginning with such historic restaurants as Perdita’s, The Wine Cellar and Carolina’s.

In 1960 Perdita’s, which served haute French food for several decades, received the Council of Paris Medal of Honor award, which went to only five restaurants in the entire country.

Magnolias and Charleston Grill are among many fine-dining opportunities that continue to respect our European culinary heritage. Attentive service, a nurturing ambience of tablecloths and noise control will continue. Delicious food, comfortable seating and fine dining elegance are alive and well in Charleston. Bon appétit!

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