

Low Country Living

Charleston's Rich History Makes it a City Worth Visiting, But This Month's Annual Food + Wine Festival Makes it a Food Lover's Paradise

[WRITTEN BY LISSA POIROT]

The first night I spent in Charleston could be described as eerie. My husband and I were staying at a bed-and-breakfast right in the Battery overlooking the harbor. Our suite was filled with antiques original to the home. Our king-sized bed was fluffy and down-covered. It was more than charming; it was decadent and gorgeous. Yet something about the place made me sleep with a light on. Not a little light in the corner of the room, mind you, but an overhead light. My dreams were filled with debutantes with long brown hair wearing white. I shook off the dreams and went downstairs for breakfast, where I overheard a couple speaking with the owner of the home, Frances Palmer. She was telling them her family's history, mentioning that she and her sister had their coming out balls and weddings in this home, and that her parents and grandparents had all died here as well. The hairs on the back of my arm stood on end. I looked up and saw a woman with long brown hair. I interrupted and asked whose bedroom I was sleeping in. "Oh, the suite? That's my grandmother's room. She died in her bed," Palmer said. I tell her about my dreams, and she just smiles. "I like having the spirits of my family here with me."

That's the thing about Charleston, S.C. The historic city, which was founded in 1670, led the secession from the Union, fired the first shots of the Civil War, and survived a decline and resurrection of its historic homes now worth millions. It's such a beautiful place, no one wants to leave, living or deceased.

A Southern Belle

Having never been to Charleston, my husband and I planned a romantic getaway to coincide with the city's second annual Food + Wine Festival. Our bed-and-breakfast, The Palmer Home, was a can't-miss-pink, circa 18th-century home with double-decker columned porches in a neighborhood filled with colorful and historic homes. Walking through the adjoining White Point Gardens with its moss-covered trees and cannons pointing out at the harbor in defense,



PHOTO COURTESY OF LISSA POIROT

Palmer House patio overlooking the harbor



Above: Charleston's Battery Row
Right: Antique vases



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLESTON AREA CONVENTION & VISITOR'S BUREAU

we could almost imagine life in Charleston 150 years ago. Instead of cars, the streets would be filled with horse-drawn carriages, and ladies in hoop skirts would step out onto the stone steps that still remain on the brick and cobblestone-lined sidewalks. Church spires still rise taller than many of the buildings on this peninsula. Men are still gentlemen, holding chairs and doors for women. Outside of modern technology, Charleston remains true to its former self: A Southern belle of a city where descendants of its founding and wealthiest families still reside.

Beyond the stately homes into which we were stealing glances at every opportunity, awaited two distinct shopping districts. The first, a straw market where peddlers of garage-sale finds, hand-woven baskets, knock-off purses and fresh fruit and vegetables line rows and rows of covered stalls near the Old Exchange. The area is bustling with tourists, and an array of casual restaurants and bars aim to attract the younger crowd found here. Just a few blocks away awaits Charleston's historic Antiques District, where streets are lined with art galleries, antique stores, boutiques and high-end retailers. It's a perfect blend of old and new, luxury and bargain shopping, and we loved both.

Roaming the streets of Historic Charleston, the heart of the city, my husband and I came across friendly faces at every turn, including a Southern gent named DAB, who struck up a conversation with us as we walked

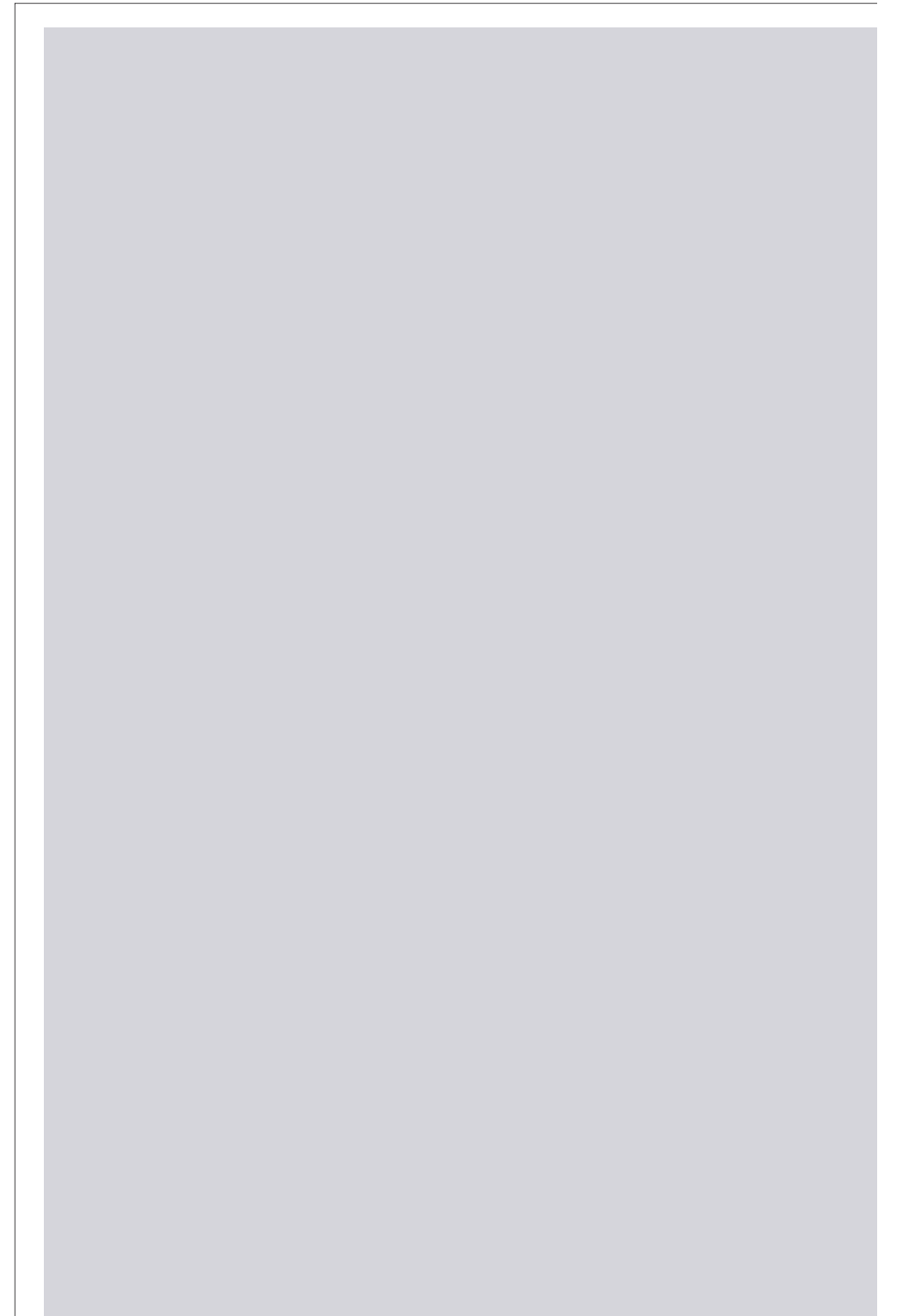
the Battery and gazed at the regal homes. (Actually, his name is David Anthony Babb, but he prefers to be called, simply, DAB.) Born here, DAB lived in Atlanta for some time before returning to lead a successful painting career. As he discusses his paintings, we walk by a home and he stops us, asking if we would like to see his work. When we say "yes," he knocks on the door and the homeowner greets DAB with a smile and beckons us inside. In her living room hang several of his pieces. Further down the street, he again knocks on a door where a gentleman was also happy to show off his piece of DAB's work, a new take on pointillism where the paint practically jumps off the canvas in layer upon layer of color, which he refers to as DABism. "I'll be painting in the park tomorrow morning, if you'd like to come say hello," DAB says as we part ways. And we feel honored to be strangers welcomed into this close-knit community with open arms.

Although we could have spent hours just enjoying the spring weather and people watching, we decided a quick jaunt across the looming suspension bridge to Sullivan's Island was necessary, for how could we not stand on the soil where soldiers stood hundreds of years before in defense of our country? Although Fort Sumter was a launching ground for the Civil War, a visit required a brief ferry ride and more time than we could manage, so our destination was the smaller Fort Moultrie, which actually began catching fire fights during the American Revolution, including the first victory over the British Navy in 1776. Cannons and bunkers are all that remain and it's difficult to imagine hundreds of men residing in these closed spaces, with guns and rockets filling the now-quiet fort with thunder.

As the sun began to set, it was time to head back to Historic Charleston to begin

our culinary weekend with the Southern Masterpieces Art & Wine Reception at the Gibbes Museum of Art, which houses works by Southern artists. The event, part of the Food + Wine Festival, was a private wine tasting showcasing six featured wine professionals. The festival's Friday night

events coincide with the Antique District's Art Walk, held quarterly the first Friday of the month. The city's free event features galleries along Meeting, Church, State, East Bay, Broad, Cumberland, Queen, Chalmers and Tradd streets — Charleston's own French Quarter — opening their doors



from 5 to 8 p.m., and providing wine and hors d'oeuvres to scores of residents and visitors before they dine at one of the area's premier restaurants, like FIG, where James Beard-nominee Chef Mike Lata resides, or the Charleston Grill in the regal Charleston Place Hotel. For festival-goers, the King Street Sip & Stroll allowed ticketholders access into private gallery parties, where a featured guest winemaker was on hand to present more tastings.

Our bellies full and our heads slightly spinning from glass after glass of wine, we enjoyed the brief walk back to The Palmer Home beneath a romantic full moon that glowed bright orange and lit the way home. The streets were filled with so many people that we did not feel intimidated by our late-night sojourn, and we made it back safely to fall asleep to those aforementioned dreams of debutantes.

THIRD ANNUAL FOOD + WINE FESTIVAL

Ready for your own culinary tour of Charleston? The third annual Food + Wine Festival will be held Feb. 28 – Mar. 2, 2008, and last-minute tickets are still available. This year's event includes chefs from New York, Boston, Florida, the Carolinas, Alabama, and even a few notable faces from Georgia, like Hugh Acheson of Athen's Five and Ten. Celebrity authors Nathalie Dupree, Marvin Woods and the Lee Brothers will be on hand for book signings, and a variety of new events will make this year's festival bigger and better than ever. Because of the popularity of the festival, now is a good time to start planning a trip for the fourth annual event in 2009! For more information, please visit www.charlestonfoodandwine.com.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ©PHOTOS.COM

Eat Up

After reading the New York Times claim that Charleston is becoming a “new capital for regional cuisine,” and hearing about the city's first Food + Wine Festival being “four days of indulgence,” we were excited to be in a city so focused on a love for food.

The first event was such a resounding success that chefs from all over the South were hopping over their stoves to attend the 2007 Festival. Saturday and Sunday events began early, taking place mainly in white tents filling Marion Square in the center of Historic Charleston. In one tent, a group of chefs were duking it out in the name of great food and clean fun in a cooking competition, while others presented specially prepared meals at restaurants across the city, including Atlanta's own Shaun Doty of Shaun's and Bacchanalia's Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison. In other tents, chefs were answering questions about perfecting recipes, while winemakers made by and for the Southern palate were presented, including winemakers in California staying true to their Southern roots. As kids visiting the children's tent tested their own culinary skills, foodies were lining up to get copies of best-selling cookbooks signed by authors and chefs in attendance, including Nathalie Dupree, author of “Shrimp and Grits,” and Matt and Ted Lee, co-authors of “The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook.”

“The Festival's focus and emphasis continues to be on everything that makes Charleston so distinctive — Low Country cuisine styles, world-renowned chefs and res-

taurants, remarkable architecture and historical landmarks, and the significance the city has had on the development of food culture of the South,” said Dupree, last year's chair of the board of directors.

At night, parties, parties and more parties made Charleston a lively hotspot for the four-day festival. Visitors were given dozens of events to choose from (advance ticket purchase was required), where wine always flowed freely. Attendees could choose to join an intimate gathering of 20 for private winemaker receptions in historic homes, or take part in the Restaurant Dine-Around, where intimate dinners at area restaurants provided guests with prix fixe menus (and more wine) at restaurants like High Cotton, Peninsula Grill, Tristan and Cypress, where guest celebrity chefs created fabulous four-course meals. Larger parties like Good Food Catering's Saturday Night Celebration featuring Low Country cuisine and live bluegrass music at the Historic Rice Mill Building or the Festival's grand finale, BBQ, Blues & Brew, with live music and pit masters dishing out the South's best barbecue, kept things lively. Featured winemakers included Falcor Wines, De Loach Vineyards, Amity Vineyards and Whetstone Wine Cellars, while scrumptious dinners and hors d'oeuvres included scores of South Carolina's favorite: shrimp. Charleston Grill's Chef Bob Waggoner's Zucchini Blossoms stuffed with Carolina Shrimp Mousse melted on the tongue, while Atlanta's own Chef Kevin Rathbun's Sweet Corn Maque Choux with Cayenne Grilled Shrimp had a spicy yet sweet kick. There was just no way not to enjoy the food and folly, foodie or not.

At the end of our weekend getaway, we left the city armed with new recipes and bottles of vino to try at home, as well as tighter pants and smiles on our faces. Charleston's beautiful and historic streets make it a must-see destination, but it is the Food + Wine Festival that haunts me still — the flavors of shrimp harvested from muddy waters as opposed to the open sea, Southern fried concoctions that did nothing for the waistline but tasted oh-so-good, and the perfect wine to bring out even the lightest touches of flavor in the chefs' creations. I understand why so many spirits can't leave Charleston, and we'll be back every year to sample its fabulous fare. **PN**

GETTING THERE

The Food + Wine Festival has partnered with AirTran to provide special rates. Direct flights from Atlanta to Charleston are less than an hour, and a cab will get you into the heart of the city, where walking is easy and brief cab rides can get you to events and historic sites that may be too much on evening walking shoes. (Visit www.charlestonfoodandwine.com to receive the AirTran code.) Rather drive? It's about five hours following I-20 East to Columbia and then I-26 East to Charleston.