



**THE NEW SOUTH**  
Clockwise from left:  
Nicole Brown,  
the founder of  
Charleston's first juice  
bar, Dellz VibeZ;

a pan-European  
pork diagram  
at the Grocery; the  
"bowl-o-noodle"  
at Two Boroughs  
Larder.



Food Matters

## Southern Exposure

By rediscovering the glories of Lowcountry cooking, Charleston put itself on the culinary map. Now its burgeoning epicurean set is demanding something more than just another riff on shrimp and grits. A bowl of pork confit ramen, anyone?

BY MATT LEE AND TED LEE PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS

IN 2011, IMMEDIATELY AFTER Sean Brock opened the restaurant Husk in a restored Victorian house on Queen Street in Charleston, S.C., the young chef was hailed a savior of Southern cuisine. Brock had schooled himself in forgotten kitchen volumes like "The Carolina Housewife," and revived strains of sesame and field peas that hadn't been cultivated there for centuries. "If it wasn't from the

South, it wasn't coming in the door," he decreed. His reverence for antebellum ingredients easily could have produced a menu of heirloom dishes, a kind of reenactment restaurant. But that's not what happened.

Instead Brock discovered a way to celebrate the South's past and present at the same moment, even sometimes in the same dish. He found a guy brewing



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**INSPIRED PAIRINGS**  
Left: Josh and Heather Keeler of Two Boroughs Larder. Above: their pork neck with chanterelles.

soy sauce in old bourbon barrels and concocted a "Kentuckyaki" glaze to brush over pig's ears that had been boiled for hours, then deep-fried, then tucked, Korean style, into butter-lettuce wraps.

Can you really call that Southern? Well, increasingly, yes. Brock's strange fusion — which made him a celebrity chef and put Charleston on the culinary map — has given way to a raft of new restaurants that exult in Southern ingredients but smack less obviously of the region. They include everything from an Israeli bakery making pink-eyed pea falafel to a husband-and-wife team serving authentic Vietnamese bun thit nuong out of a renovated gas station. These places are mainly clustered north of Charleston's tourist center, in the neighborhoods of Elliotborough and Cannonborough, which have recently



become the hub of a new creative class, a place where architects, bakers, even milliners set up shop almost weekly.

At the Grocery, which opened in a former furniture factory on Cannon Street two years ago, you can see all the requisite Southern revival

staples: jars of homemade pickles, fried oysters with deviled-egg dressing, a meaty charred broccoli with pimento cheese sauce. But there are also tagines and ragus and local fish like beeliner, a kind of snapper, prepared with an Italian salsa verde. "We're so fortunate in Charleston to be surrounded by top-notch ingredients, but I feel more compelled to show them in a way that's not truly Southern," the owner Kevin Johnson said. "There are already plenty of chefs doing great shrimp and grits in town."

A few blocks away, at Heather and Josh Keeler's Two Boroughs Larder, the menu spans the globe from Korea to Mexico to Taiwan but remains grounded in the Southern foodscape. "A lot of people say we're Southern by default because we use so many local ingredients," Heather explained. The Keelers opened Two Boroughs Larder in 2011 in a tiny spot straddling two storefronts. The couple's bold food — red-chile-fired goat pozole and a hash of roasted bone marrow and escargot laced with numbing Szechuan peppercorn — initially caused some consternation in the chattering classes here. Did Charlestonians have the palate for something this torqued up and Momofukuesque?

But the naysayers were soon silenced by the crowds who showed up, among them luminaries from the tattooed, knife-roll carrying set like Del Posto's Mark Ladner and the Athens, Ga., chef and "Top Chef" judge Hugh Acheson, who noted that Southern food, despite its provincial image, has always been open to outside influences. "Let's remember that Southern food is a beautiful hodgepodge to begin with, a puzzle of Gullah, spice route, Native American, European and the West Indies," he said. "It's a food that welcomes cultures to the table."

Among the most ambitious of Charleston's new crop of restaurants is Mike Lata's the Ordinary, a seafood temple in a limestone Art Deco bank building. Lata, a Massachusetts native, moved to Charleston in the late 1990s to helm the kitchen at Anson, and readily proved his Southern-larder bona fides, grinding grits daily on a moped-size mill. At the Ordinary, he celebrates the bounty of Lowcountry watermen but also looks north, to New England, with a perfectly dressed lobster roll on a locally made bun, and a smoky

**CHARLESTON CHEWS** Left: a local eating a schnitzel sandwich at Butcher & Be. Far left: the dining room.



**JOLT OF LIFE**  
Charleston's first juice bar, Dellz Vibe, opened last summer.



#### CREATURE COMFORTS

The Ordinary, Mark Lata's Art Deco seafood temple, has a New England-style raw bar loaded with the freshest Lowcountry oysters, shrimp and clams.



clam chowder. "You can only tell the tale of the South so many times before it becomes de rigueur," he said.

Michael Shemtov, who opened the bakery and craft-sandwich spot Butcher & Bee in the shadow of the crosstown overpass, has also brought his own story to the South. Shemtov was born in Israel to an Iraqi father and a mother from Shreveport, La. Shemtov's chef, Stuart Tracy, filters Shemtov's Iraqi-Israeli heritage through a seasonal

South Carolina prism. So you'll find a mezze plate with hummus, eggplant dip, stewed tomatoes and skhug, the classic Middle Eastern condiment, here with cilantro, lime, garlic, jalapeño and salt. Shemtov said, "My chef who makes the skhug — he's 28 years old, spent his whole life in the South, he can't even pronounce it, but he's aced it."

In fact, the food scene here has become so vibrant and cosmopolitan that a place can feel homegrown without even nodding to Southern style at all. Xiao Bao Biscuit, which opened its doors last November, became a restaurant-

Xiao Bao Biscuit attempts an Asian-Southern fusion, but locals were clamoring for dead-on Asian dishes like Japanese pancakes, lamb and pork jiaozi.

industry hangout almost overnight. It is the passion project of the husband-and-wife team Duolan Li and Josh Walker, who moved to South Carolina in 2009. Walker had bounced around New York City kitchens (including David Chang's Momofuku Ssam Bar) for a few years and met Li, who at the time was working at a movie theater. They set out on a six-month journey across China, Vietnam, Thailand and Japan, to learn more about Asian food. "After working long hours in New York, when we got to Asia, we had nothing to do," Walker said. "I could stand on a street corner in Taipei and watch a woman making scallion pancakes for a half hour."

Xiao Bao Biscuit was first conceived as an Asian-Southern pop-up operation. But the couple quickly realized locals were clamoring for dead-on Asian dishes like Japanese cabbage pancake okonomiyaki and lamb and pork jiaozi. Their dimly lit and expertly distressed restaurant now sits in a former gas station on Spring Street, a major east-west artery that friends have nicknamed Spring Roll Street because it's also home to a sushi spot and a Vietnamese sandwich shop.

For a town afloat on bacon-washed bourbon, perhaps the most visible sign of how quickly things have progressed is that there's now even a juice bar in Charleston. Nicole Brown opened Dellz Vibe last August, around the corner from Dellz Deli, the beloved sandwich spot run by her mother, Maudell Grayson (aka a "Dell"). "I wanted to show people in the South that we can eat healthy and make it taste good," Brown said. She makes elixirs like Spicy Coco Boy with almond milk, organic cacao nibs and a searing jolt of cayenne. Amid a stretch of recently opened cocktail bars, Brown hosts her own kind of happy hour, complete with juice shots, on upper King Street. She has plans to ship her juices nationwide, but for now locals are just thankful to get some healthy redemption after a night of too many cocktails at Xiao Bao Biscuit. ■



**EASTERN PROMISES** Above: Josh Walker of Xiao Bao Biscuit. Above left: fixings at the bar. Left: an okonomiyaki cabbage pancake.

