

## A Year of Oysters and Accolades at The Ordinary

Thursday, December 19, 2013, by [Erin Perkins](#)

Welcome to *One Year In*, a feature in which Eater interviews the chefs and owners of restaurants celebrating their one year anniversary.



[Photo: *The Ordinary* <<http://eattheordinary.com/>> ]

Behind perennial favorite **FIG**, raw bar emporium <<http://charleston.eater.com/places/the-ordinary>> **The Ordinary** is the second venture from **Mike Lata** and **Adam Nemirow**. It was easy to see the restaurant would be a success, because even before they unlocked the front doors, the press couldn't stop buzzing about the new spot on King Street. Former Eater editor **Katie Abbondanza** did her part by implementing an [hourly countdown](http://charleston.eater.com/tags/the-hourly-ordinary) <<http://charleston.eater.com/tags/the-hourly-ordinary>> to the opening.

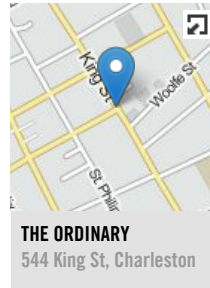
Today, it is 365 days later, and the chatter has yet to thin. **The Daily Meal** just named The Ordinary "Restaurant of the Year" <<http://www.thedaily meal.com/2013-restaurant-year-ordinary/121713>> " for 2013. While the accolades are nice, Eater wanted to hear what Lata and Nemirow thought about their first year. Read on to discover the beginnings, what an "ordinary" is and expectations for 2014.

### Where did the idea for an oyster hall come about?

**Nemirow:** It was an idea we were toying around with for forever—to build a temple to seafood, along with what we saw as a gap in the market. "Where should you go for the best seafood in town?" was always the question. The oyster hall aspect of it was the birthplace of a different concept, something for us to latch on to and an identifiable concept to have as part of a seafood house.

**Lata:** Originally, we wanted to be a **small oyster bar**. When we thought of that concept, we wanted to go eat at that restaurant, and it didn't exist in our town. It spoke to us and our sensibilities. With oysters and my love of seafood, and the fact that FIG sold most of these things, there was an obvious demand in the market. And after several years, there hadn't been a new one.

Our position in the market, when defining FIG in the beginning, **was difficult**.



**THE ORDINARY**  
544 King St, Charleston

[DOWNTOWN](#)

[ADAM NEMIROW](#)

[MIKE LATA](#)

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[THE ORDINARY](#)

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We had to explain it was a bistro with European sensibilities, Southern ingredients and all of a sudden it was this **long-winded answer** to the fact it was just what we liked to call a neighborhood bistro. We thought expansion would be difficult and to do another concept we had to explain to people would be a harder thing to do. **So, to pick that one focus point would allow us to come around and work within that box and interpret it and hopefully, package it up to be able to give a one word answer when somebody said, "Where can you get the best seafood?" when they came to town.** It's what everyone asks when they come to town. We said, let's try to answer that question or be one of the answers to that question.

#### **How did you come into your current space?**

**Lata:** We had a property we put an offer on, and we thought it was the asking price. The bank was behind us, and all signals said we had a pretty good shot at it. But at the end of the day, **it didn't happen.** And no matter how seasoned you are, I feel like I got emotionally attached, because I was visualizing the space and driving by five times a day. Then some friends of ours said, "Hey, I have some people that want to meet with you guys to talk about a space that is not yet on the market up near the new project for Midtown." We said, "Sure, let's take a look at it."

**Nemirow:** The one consistent was that we wanted to buy a building. **That's probably why it took us so long to open a second restaurant.** We didn't want to rent. It had to be the right deal for everybody. The first one wasn't the right deal for the other party, and the second one to come around was on a much grander scale. The banker's **knees buckled a little bit** when we told them the new scope of the project, but they had faith in us. We felt we were up to the challenge of a bigger, grander space, and the idea of the oyster hall was born.

**Lata:** We definitely had the "**if we build they will come**" attitude. We knew a restaurant couldn't survive waiting three years for the hotel next door to be built. We still felt that concept was a needed concept—not that we don't have oyster bars in town. They don't have the sort of collection of local purveyors, really, which makes us more expensive. We don't serve Gulf oysters, and we don't buy any cod or frozen fish whatsoever. **It's coming off of Mark Marhefka's boats. It's coming off of Kimberly [Carroll]'s nets. We use Clammer Dave's clams and oysters and source from St. Jude Farms and Lady's Island.** They're all premium, boutique kind of items that aren't cheap, but for those people that want to have their connection to Charleston—what we have to offer for seafood—that's the cost of wanting that experience. We knew that it would be a new expression, and **we stuck our necks out** there as far as we could, and we put our life savings and many ways put FIG on the line to make it happen, but we both believed in it.

#### **Did the bigger space change what your menu looked like?**

**Lata:** 100 percent. Again, going from one to two restaurants is a hard thing to do. Doing a small focused concept, learning how to be in two places at once and learning how to manage two general managers and two chef de cuisines. The scale doesn't matter as much, but from a volume standpoint, it's different than if you had something that was 1500 square feet—we could get our heads around that very comfortably.

With the smaller place, it was going to be very much an oyster bar like [Swan Oyster Depot](http://sf.eater.com/places/swan-oyster-depot) <<http://sf.eater.com/places/swan-oyster-depot>> , where you might have 40 or 50 seats, tops. It would be the quick hustle and bustle—the in and out with a **dozen oysters and a couple of beers** and take off. It was going to be something that I thought was going to be a very small menu and something I thought we could write in the morning very easily based on what was coming in. The Ordinary's menu has 40 something items on it. We think it has something for everybody, but we're still expanding those ideas.

### **How has the menu changes since day one?**

**Lata:** When you talk about the name of the restaurant, The Ordinary, it's a term for a public house. With that all-inclusive, bustling brasserie element that we're trying to create here, we felt that was a good start. **The ordinaries serve one meal.** One night it might be some sort of stew or whatever, and you pay your money for that. We wanted to offer something like that.

The day before we opened, we had a list of plat du'jours, and those were going to be called "the ordinaries" and they would be a relatively less expensive and more of a value experience. You'd pay one fixed price and get a soup or salad and an entree. It could be a fish stew, a paella, a whole roasted fish baked in salt, steamed lobster or fish and chips. You could come in and say "**I'll have the ordinary**" and have a full meal and it would be the best value.

When we first opened, I felt that those things should be staples in the making, and I wanted to pull back and say, before we put our cards into this concept, let's develop some systems first so when we finally launch the ordinaries, they're what I'd like to call "I'd get off my couch for" kind of dish. I'm at home and I want to have that. **We want to bring ordinaries the menu in the second year.**

**Nemirow:** That goes for everything here, not just the menu. We're about to go over a sort of **second facelift** to the restaurant, where we'll get some new artwork, design and decor. There's a lot of placeholders in here now. We wanted to sit back and study the first year to see what our clientele wanted, see what the staff was like and see what our systems were like. Now we have that information under our belt.

**Lata:** The menu has changed in the sense that simple execution is the priority. What the customer needs is a well-executed dish, and once you start getting outside of your comfort zone and the result isn't tasty, then it's all for naught. Looking back at the opening menu, it was all very simple and streamline. I said, "Guys, our only focus is to make the raw bar the best raw bar we can," because that will draw the crowds and the rest of the stuff has to be very simple so we can execute it. As the months went by, we stretched our techniques.

If you look at today's menu versus day one, you'll see a slew of better and more interesting things. **The first menu was an EP, and now we have a full-length or double album. It's all the same kind of cooking, but tighter and more expressive.** We're going to launch the ordinaries in January. It could have been done earlier, but it's been a busy year. And now we know who we are and what we're capable of. We have an opportunity to continue our momentum in 2014.

### **Have there been any surprises this year?**

**Lata:** Food-wise, we knew an oyster slider would well.

**Nemirow:** I bet we sell more **triple towers** than I thought. We've had to order more cages.

**Lata:** Which is what I was saying. The culinary focus of the restaurant was to be the **best raw bar we could be**, by buying the best stuff and curating the best oysters from the most respectable areas and growers. Whenever someone from the media would ask to shoot something, we'd say, "They have to shoot the triple tower." The whole concept was to get people excited about this really festive experience. Including the oyster and lobster selection that you normally get, you have the crudos and raw things and scallops and pickled shrimp.

**Nemirow:** You know who's the biggest fan? is **Perig Goulet** from the **former La Fourchette** <<http://charleston.eater.com/archives/2013/10/14/la-fourchette-to-close-this-week.php>> . He came in three times last weekend and told me the tower was his favorite thing in the world That's all he wants. He wants to wake up and eat crab and oysters.

### **How did you feel about the early accolades? Being named the best**

## restaurant in the world before you even opened?

[both laugh]

**Lata:** Unworthy?

**Nemirow:** Obviously grateful and gracious. Our PR team was great, but it's still opening a new and risky business. Perhaps, a little under deserving?

**Lata:** We knew we had hit a **sweet spot**, and we knew it was a story with a lot of layers. From who we bought from and being in business for ten years and building FIG from scratch, I would anticipate anyone else's restaurant to get press if that was their story. One of the things that was interesting was, not to say we weren't proud of the work we were doing, but **we had yet to prove it to ourselves** through the cycle of the business. We needed to prove we could maintain a consistent product.

People were walking through the front of the restaurant and saying it was their favorite restaurant, and they hadn't eaten here. **They were predisposed to love it, and it was hard to process that.** At this point, I feel comfortable that we're doing something noteworthy. What makes Adam and I a good team is that we are comfortable with not moving forward and reassessing the situation if we need. It meant a lot to be told all those nice things up front, but I couldn't wait until the first year was over. It was a busy, busy year. I got married, had a baby and did all kinds of stuff. And we had to be at FIG too. We couldn't turn a blind eye to our flagship. We sat back and patiently tried to do as best as we could. We knew the national exposure would buy us some time to get it right if we were having some problems. Visitors would still come to see what we were about.

**Nemirow:** It took us a while at FIG to get that, maybe four or five years to get that sort of exposure.

## What was the first year of FIG versus the first year of the Ordinary?

**Nemirow:** It was a lot easier here.

**Lata:** When we opened FIG, we were green. We were passionate. We were dumb in thinking we could just figure it out.

**Nemirow:** We had ten years to build out a network of vendors, purveyors, staff and artisans. At FIG when we first opened, it was like, "Oh, yeah we need that." At The Ordinary, we already had that plan in place. Our staffing and community contacts made it 1000 times easier. At FIG, we had to do it all ourselves.

**Lata:** It was a grind.

**Nemirow:** Not to say this was a cakewalk. The pressure was there.

**Lata:** Being a more mature leader, for me, made the biggest difference. As far as service goes, you're ten years better in that, and as far as cuisine goes, I'd like to think I'm ten years better in that. It takes a lot less to get things done as before. **There's no question, those first two years at FIG were very difficult.**

**Nemirow:** This is a trick I've told some friend who are opening a restaurant soon. Pick a date on next year's calendar, one which you absolutely know you'll be open, and focus on that day. I remember sitting there in early 2012 and I focused on March 1, 2013, because if we weren't open by then, we would never be open. And I just focused on that. **We beat that by several months.**

*The Ordinary opens this evening at 5:00 p.m. to celebrate their first year and is offering half-priced local oysters to patrons. Chef Lata will be behind the raw bar shucking the mollusks.*

· [All The Ordinary Coverage <http://charleston.eater.com/places/the-ordinary>](http://charleston.eater.com/places/the-ordinary)

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· [The Hourly Ordinary <http://charleston.eater.com/tags/the-hourly-ordinary>](http://charleston.eater.com/tags/the-hourly-ordinary)

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· [Restaurant of the Year <http://www.thedailymeal.com/2013-restaurant-year-ordinary/121713>](http://www.thedailymeal.com/2013-restaurant-year-ordinary/121713) [The Daily Meal]