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Travel

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Inventive Menus, Old-School and New

A quest to find downtown spots that stand out in a crowded culinary landscape.

By SUZANNE MACNEILLE

Rain was falling in fits and starts on a late afternoon in downtown Charleston, and sodden azalea blossoms were scattered across the sidewalk along Queen Street.

"It's bourbon weather out there," the bartender said as we ducked into a well-known establishment that was just opening for the long night ahead.

Now "bourbon weather" might suggest an occasion to hunker down in some quiet watering hole, but it was late spring in Charleston, and at the Bar at Husk (where there are scores of bourbon options) it wasn't long — about 10 minutes — before every bar stool was taken. Behind us, more patrons materialized: locals, student types, tourists from New Jersey, Washington, Germany. Some leaned against the building's century-old brick walls; others climbed the stairs to the lounge for a hand-drawn cocktail before an early dinner at Sean Brock's famous restaurant a few yards away. We remained at the bar, sampling silky shivers of cured ham and sipping navy-strength rum sweetened with strawberry syrup. It was 4:30 in the afternoon, and we were all basking in bourbon weather.

Over the next three overcast days, we learned that the Bar at Husk wasn't the only place drawing crowds in dicey weather. Up and down King Street, along chic and sometimes shabby lanes, and in nondescript areas on the edge of downtown, people were sampling local beer and inventive cocktails and feasting on everything from pickled shrimp to rabbit pâté. Like us, they were pursuing a favorite Charleston pastime: eating and drinking from morning until night.

The options for doing so have multiplied over the last 15 years or so. Restaurants like the Grocery and the Ordinary in the Upper King Street area, and Edmund's Oast on Morrison Drive, have pushed the boundaries of the downtown Charleston dining scene well beyond the genteel, almost too-perfect historic district, with its rambling colonial mansions, tangled gardens and mossy graveyards.

On our trip, my friend Jill and I wandered both within and beyond that district, eschewing establishments that we felt had received a lot of press in recent years, like the restaurant proper at Husk, aiming instead for a taste of both old-school Charleston and new. And so we set our sights on two formal venues — the kind of places where waiters spread your napkins in your lap for you — and two recently opened spots. Here they are, starting with the newest.

Edmund's Oast

Amid Charleston's prodigious wave of new restaurants, four-month-old Edmund's Oast stands out not just for its curious name (oast is a kiln for drying hops, Edmund is the first name of a Revolutionary-era rebel brewer), but for the intriguingly weird ideas hidden in the restaurant's various menus: chicken pizzad and duck heart tagliatelle; peanut butter and jelly beer; speed turpin custard; and milk punch infused with both Applejack brandy and Apple Jacks cereal. The owners, Rich Carley and Scott Storr, both from New York State, and the team behind the constantly evolving menus are clearly having fun dreaming up new ways to showcase the mostly local ingredients they rely on.

Situated in a boxy, nondescript building on the edge of downtown, Edmund's Oast, which is modestly described as a brew pub on the restaurant's website, is not especially convenient (it was the only restaurant we had to drive to on our visit), but that's not keeping people away. Mr. Storr said they are hoping to fill a hole they see in the local dining scene: "Charleston has no shortage of terrific restaurants and bars, but there aren't many places bringing all things together under one roof, where to create one place with incredible food, incredible cocktails, beer and wine."

The chef Andy Henderson's menus are constantly changing, but the brunch menu, which he described as "playtime," is especially vulnerable to the kitchen's whims. Who knows when the sultry hops-smoked brisket will pop up on the menu again, but it appeared on our table, blanketed in sweet onion gravy and accompanied by a poached farm egg encircled with polenta, a kale salad in a light vinaigrette, and a confit tomato that burst into bright, tart liquid when touched with a knife. In comparison, the brown sugar ham with cauli-stuffed snap peas and carrots was somewhat underwhelming. Not so the dense, sweet, utterly decadent corn bread, topped with an ice-cream-sized scoop of honey butter. House pickles — gold and red beets, cauliflower and green strawberries — provided an earthy, palate-cleansing crunch.

The interior, with its pale wood tones, big, comfortable chairs, high ceilings and minimalist chandeliers, is sleek and lo-fi-like. Above the kitchen, dangling chandelier lights behind glass resemble works of art, as do the graphically arranged signs listing the 48 drinks on tap (mostly regional beers, including those brewed in-house).

We would return to taste a few of those beers, including the P&H (which has both aroma and taste, is true to its name), as



Top, from left, roasted spring onions with lemon and thyme at the Ordinary; roasted flounder with warm bacon, cowpeas and fennel salad, squash and parsley at Edmund's Oast; grilled kurubuta pork chop with dirty potato, mustard greens, grain mustard and rosemary jus at Charleston Grill; oyster sliders at the Ordinary; lemon "ice box" pie with chantilly cream, blackberry coulis and candied lemon zest at Circa 1886. Middle, the Ordinary, a Southern seafood hall and oyster bar in a former bank building. Right, from top, Edmund's Oast head chef Andy Henderson; Charleston Grill; and Circa 1886.

well as a sweet, hearty meal; smoky spinach, turnips and confit chicken; and aromatic cannelle panna cotta in a bright pool of pureed kiwi and strewn lavishly with mustertion blossoms.

Edmund's Oast, 1081 Morrison Drive, 843-727-1145; edmundsoast.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tips, about \$80 for two.



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The Ordinary Mike Lata, the chef and co-owner of this year-and-a-half-old seafood restaurant and raw bar, has a thing about oysters. "It's amazing what you can do with an oyster," he said recently. "You can poach them, broil them, smoke them, pickle them." He estimates that some 7,000 oysters a week are consumed at his restaurant — mostly raw, but a recent menu also offered them baked with ramp butter; crispy with beef tartare; and smoked with hot sauce. There are oyster sliders, and, if you happen to be here for the once-a-week Southern fish fry, you are likely to find a plump fried oyster alongside the triggerfish and soft-shell crab (or whatever is fresh that day) that have been soaked in buttermilk, battered and fried to a light crisp.

That's what we ordered on a Sunday night, after a 30-minute stroll up King Street from the historic district. The farther we walked, the quieter it became, though other establishments, including the Grocery (a restaurant just off King with the own interesting locavore kitchen and imaginative cocktail program), have also opened nearby.

Soon we spotted the handsome former bank building where the Ordinary is housed. A few years ago, when Mr. Lata —

who is also a co-owner of the popular FIG in the historic district — acquired the building, no one, he said, was sure if the restaurant would survive. Since then, it has become a fixture on the culinary landscape.

Inside, we found bistro-style chairs and tables and an upper dining alcove that offers spacious tables removed from the hubbub downstairs. We liked that hubbub, and stayed downstairs, where we ordered house cocktails, including a Delfino Fizz — a crisp mix of Lillet rosé, blood orange liqueur, grapefruit and soda water — a perfect counterpoint to the subtly smoked triggerfish pâté.

Besides the daily meal that includes, for example, Caribbean fish stew on Thursdays and a seasonal fish schnitzel on Wednesday, the seafood-centric menu lists only a few large plates. Selections from the raw bar, and shellfish towers up to three tiers high, are the most popular items. A startlingly green garlic soup with crème fraiche was lenny and refreshing; we alternated spoonfuls of it with bites of sweet spring onions that had been cut in half, seared and then lightly roasted and sprinkled with lemon juice, sea salt and olive oil.

"It's the classic style of our restaurant," Mr. Lata said. "Instead of manipulating them, you let the flavors come through. The Ordinary, 544 King Street, (843) 414-7099; ordinarydiner.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tip, is about \$80.

Circa 1886

Even in Charleston, with its grand churches and meticulously restored houses, the looming Westworth Mansion, built by a cotton merchant in the late 19th century, is a startling sight: mansard-roofed, pressed red brick, a cupola atop it all. Behind the mansion, which is now a hotel, the carriage house where the formal Circa 1886 operates, resembles a dollhouse. We strolled down the leafy walkway, enchanted.

Twenty minutes later I was trying to put my finger on what, exactly, made the place feel so stodgy. Was it the greenish-beige walls, which seemed to absorb all light? Was it the near silence? So many people complain about noise in restaurants these days, but here, there was no merrily tinkling of ice, no laughter; every footfall was muffled on the carpeted floor. "No one's talking," my friend said. "Did you notice that?" Even our conversation was stifled as we looked around the half-filled restaurant. Our waiter, however, talked. He dutifully explained the dishes in precise detail, but without particular enthusiasm. He nodded, asked us we had questions, and told us that if we wanted dessert we should order it with the meal.

Later, the chef, Marc Collins, explained that the service was designed to match "the caliber of the clientele" who stayed at Westworth Mansion. "We want people to have a sticky feet," he said.

Whatever our problem was, it certainly wasn't Mr. Collins's food, which was, for the most part, excellent. The meal began with ultrahigh plantation rice rolls — "with just a hint of orange zest," our waiter said — and a chilled asparagus salad with a peppery buttermilk dressing. A mound of crab macaroni and cheese, sporting a crisp Parmesan crust, was filled with crab and cremini mushrooms and tasted more of the sea than of cheese. Muscovy duck breast and a chilled asparagus salad with an exotic star fruit papaya sambal, was a pretty, if slightly fussy, assemblage of extraordinarily tender meat over dirty saffron rice.

The dishes were clear. We sat for 10 minutes, silently. Then, at last, dessert arrived. We gasped. It was as if Salvador Dalí had been born in the kitchen as a pastry chef. The plates — simply described as caramel banana cake and lemon ice box pie on the menu — were festooned with flowers, curlicues of sauces, a banana slice here, a single blueberry there, flourishes of blackberry coulis, sprinklings of lemon zest, striped chocolate flutes like sorcerer's wands.

"Now you understand why we ask that you order in advance," said our waiter, whose smile was, for the first time all evening, genuine.

Circa 1886, 149 Westworth Street, 843-553-7828; circa1886.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tips around \$100 for two.

Charleston Grill

This 24-year-old restaurant in the heart of the historic district is a Charleston classic that could be described with the same adjectives used to organize its versatile menu — Pure, Lush, Southern and Cosmopolitan.

Situated inside the upscale shopping and dining area of the Belmont Charleston Place hotel, the restaurant's entrance is marked by oversized French doors thrown open to reveal a gleaming foyer with chandelier, table and not a sign of life anywhere. It is an odd, frozen-in-time tableau, suggesting a stiff white-glove decorum, but don't be put off. Around a corner, past a jazz trio and inside a white-linen dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking an illuminated garden, lies a different sort of formality than what we found in Circa 1886 — the lighthearted, celebratory sort. Our waiters, assigned two to a table, introduced themselves by first names and weren't beyond offering an opinionated menu preference or two. Around us, guests seemed at ease in their finery, as did a pair of dressed-up children dashing between tables. The swirling activity, the music, the laughter and lights: There was something simultaneously glamorous and comfortable about the place.

We cherry-picked from the four menus, favoring the Southern list, where we found the restaurant's signature crab cake, a lush pillow of lightly seared crab surrounded by tiny tomatoes and creek shrimp in a dill-mayo sauce. "Held together with hope and love" is the way the chef Michelle Weaver later described her efforts to limit the filler so that the result was "more crab than cake." The grilled kurubuta pork chop was dauntingly huge; topped with sautéed, slightly-too-salty mustard greens, it rested heavily on an intensely smoky platter of Carolina gold rice, bacon and beef sausage. A lovely salad of salt-roasted beets, blood orange and goat cheese from the Cosmopolitan list was dressed in a sweet sherry-date vinaigrette.

The stream of dishes was punctuated by the occasional amuse-bouche (a spoonful of blue cheese mousse in a pot reduction); a dab of honey praline panna cotta). The gifts continued after dessert (duce de leche profiteroles beneath key lime and coconut sorbet) with an array of sweets, and a box of breakfast breads to take home.

There's a lot of interest in the hip, cool places these days," said Mickey Baker, the general manager of Charleston Grill, a few weeks later. "We'll never be that. But sometimes people just want to feel pampered."

Charleston Grill, 224 King Street, 843-577-4322; charlestongrill.com. Three-course dinner for two, without drinks or tip, averages around \$125.

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