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MARCH/APRIL 2013

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A SPECIAL REPORT
BY JOSHUA HAMMER

THE ART AND SPECTACLE OF

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Chef Mike Lata of FIG and The Ordinary—a New England native who's become the king of haute Lowcountry cuisine

AT TABLE

EXTRA ORDINARY

The restaurant FIG in Charleston, South Carolina, is the best of a world-class lot. But chef Mike Lata's next act, The Ordinary, is something this town has never seen: a temple to the seafood of the South. BY SID EVANS

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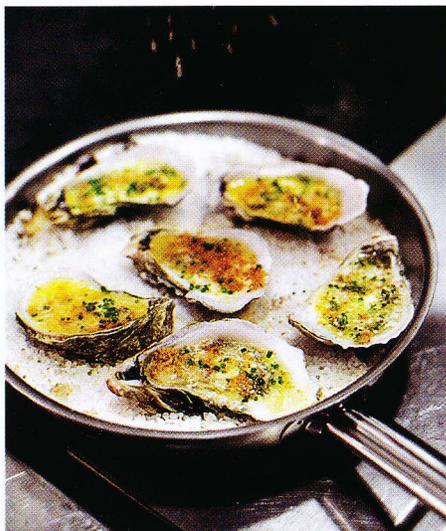
Chef Mike Lata and I are standing in pluff mud on an oyster bed near Dewees Island just off Charleston, South Carolina, when he pops open an oyster with his pocketknife, hands it to me and says, “Here, eat that.” I slurp it right from the shell. It’s tender, salty and delicious, with just a hint of that Lowcountry mud. Lata watches for my reaction as if it’s a dish he’s been preparing all day. “The secret to an oyster is to serve it quickly,” he says, prying one open for himself. “That way there’s no time for it to lose its sense of place. A great Charleston oyster should taste like Charleston.”

Lata calls this “merroir,” and it’s the buzzword behind his new seafood restaurant, *The Ordinary*, which opened in December in a 1920s-era bank building on Charleston’s King Street. Like terroir in wine, “merroir” is a fancy way of saying that he wants to highlight the places where his seafood comes from—especially this place, the Lowcountry. Lata believes that some of the best-tasting wild oysters in the world come from this mud. And that’s why I’ve joined him in the marsh this morning with one of his main shellfish purveyors, Dave Belanger, who’s known in this town as Clammer Dave.

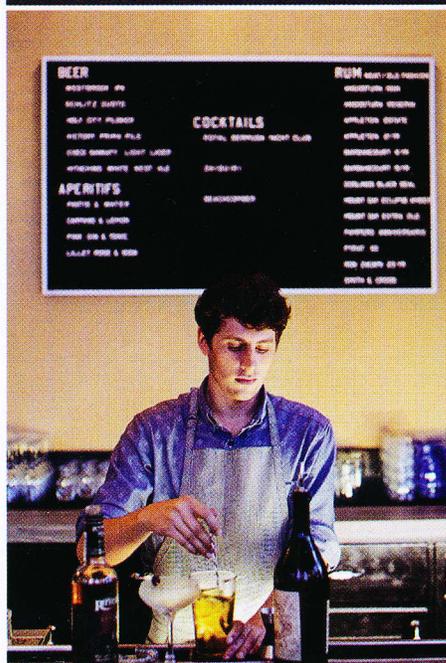
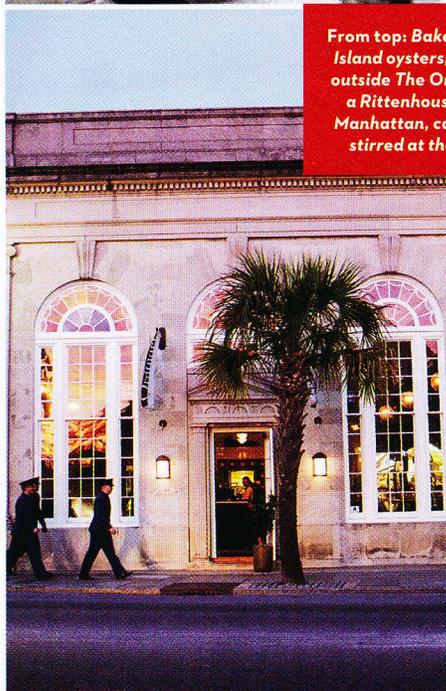
They’re an unlikely pair. Even on a cold morning in the marsh, Lata (whose looks have earned him the nickname “Hotta Lata” in Southern food circles) manages to appear stylish in a black corduroy jacket, Ray-Bans and lace-up boots. Clammer Dave wears a worn camouflage jumpsuit and a red hoodie, the uniform of an old salt who’s worked and lived on the water for more than a decade. If Lata is the polished spokesman of the Charleston food scene, Clammer Dave is his wild alter ego. The two men have spent years working these muddy banks with a common goal: oysters and clams that are delicious and distinctive, whatever the cost.

“He’s my worst customer, but he’s also my best customer,” Clammer Dave says of Lata as we step into his Carolina skiff. “The majority of chefs don’t notice small changes in the product, but Mike does.”

Lata challenges his carefully chosen local fishermen on their processes, pushing them to make everything fresher and better, whether it’s Clammer Dave’s oysters,



From top: Baked Otter Island oysters; sunset outside *The Ordinary*; a Rittenhouse Rye Manhattan, carefully stirred at the bar.



Mark Marhefka’s triggerfish or Kimberly Carroll’s softshell crabs. The success or failure of *The Ordinary*—which is Lata’s second restaurant—depends as much on his purveyors as it does on his sous-chef.

To maximize the flavor of a Lowcountry oyster, Clammer Dave breaks the clusters into singles and then suspends them in racks near Dewees Island so the tides can purify them. (“It’s like taking them to a place where they can vacation and relax,” he says.) At his processing facility in nearby McClellanville, oyster “sculptors” chisel each one to perfection and then check it for leaks, which can drain the liquor and the flavor. Much of this process was developed with Lata inspecting (and often rejecting) the product at every step. By the time one of Clammer Dave’s Capers Blades hits an ice tray at *The Ordinary* or Lata’s James Beard award-winning bistro, *FIG*, the chef wants tender, briny perfection.

He wants you to taste the “merroir.”

A tall order, perhaps. For generations, Charlestonians have steamed their oysters in big clusters under wet burlap, then eaten them with an oyster knife in one hand and a saltine in the other. The town has never been known for its raw seafood. But thanks to Lata and other chefs, that’s changing, and now you’ll see local oyster varieties like Otter Island Wilds and Carolina Cups on menus around town. And these days Clammer Dave has delivered to Nashville’s Capitol Grille, Tennessee’s Blackberry Farm and Locanda Verde in Manhattan.

Lata is a native New Englander, and *The Ordinary* reflects that piece of his history, too. Alongside Clammer Dave’s oysters will be varieties from up and down the coast, and even Maine lobster when he can get it from the right source.

As we head back to the dock, with sunlight reflecting off the marsh and a salt smell in the air, Lata tells me that for a long time he didn’t even like fish—hated the texture, hated the taste. As a young cook on Martha’s Vineyard, he forced himself to eat one piece of seafood a day, because he knew that if he wanted to succeed, he’d eventually have to excel at cooking it. Then he had a bite of striped bass that a friend’s father had caught hours earlier. “It was like



A lobster roll, stuffed to the breaking point

a light switch went on," he says. "Now it's all I think about."

If you live in Charleston for a while, as I did, you realize that one restaurant in the Holy City is regarded with a reverence usually reserved for churches, and that's Mike Lata's FIG (it stands for "Food Is Good"). He opened the restaurant ten years ago with his friend Adam Nemirow, who's also his partner at The Ordinary, where he's now fo-

cused on the wine program and the service.

In the early days at FIG, Lata became known for deceptively simple dishes based on fresh Lowcountry vegetables. The late *New York Times* critic R. W. Apple Jr. said of his pan-roasted cauliflower with mustard butter, "Only the turmeric-flavored cauliflower dishes in India excited me quite as much." Lata had moved to Charleston from Atlanta in part because of the availability of

fresh produce. "Our mission at FIG was to source locally and cook seasonally," he says. "It's become de rigueur to cook that way, but it wasn't ten years ago." A fellow chef called him Veggie Boy, a nickname he wore like a badge.

When Lata got his first James Beard nominations in 2007 and 2008 and won in 2009, FIG was vaulted from popular neighborhood bistro to national hot spot. There were the usual trappings of chef stardom: an *Iron Chef* appearance (he lost), a *Nightline* segment and invitations to cook at food festivals around the country. When the band Wilco was playing a concert in town, the members asked him to cook for them backstage. And when Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds needed a chef for their secret wedding at the nearby Boone Hall Plantation last summer, they called Lata. "It was fun," he says casually.

Lata has never strayed far from his kitchen, or his personal mission: to be a little better every day. Like one of his food heroes, Frank Stitt, who redefined Southern cooking with his consistently great restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama, Lata has always been a powerful presence at FIG. He mingles with the clientele, charming guests in his seersucker chef's coat. Like Stitt, he's relentlessly focused on a blend of food, drink and service, which Lata sees as his highest calling. "As a complete package, Frank's restaurants run at a level that few ever get to," he says. "I get chills just talking about it."

Lata's first food hero was Julia Child, who inspired him to drop out of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and try his hand as a chef. He had cut class to see her speak, and she talked passionately about discovering new cuisines, and the way food can facilitate a rich and cultured life. "I realized that nothing in the past year and a half had inspired me so much," he says. "That was the last day I ever set foot on campus."

The Ordinary has been open for a month when I go for dinner with my wife. The early reviews have been excellent; the place is packed every night. I'm curious to see how the old Bank of America building has become the seafood restaurant of Mike Lata's dreams. The original architect was Albert Simons, who edited *The Early Architecture of Charleston* and who understood a thing or two about capturing

that magical Charleston light. The scene is mellow when we arrive at 5:30 p.m., and the former bank feels like a cathedral, with its soaring windows and 22-foot ceilings—except for the huge steel vault that serves as a window into the bustling kitchen.

Lata greets us with a big smile and gives us the nickel tour. True to form, he's micro-managed everything, from the old-growth-walnut tabletops to the sea-foam subway tiles that cover the jumping raw bar, where three chefs *de huitres* are shucking oysters and littleneck clams. "The Ordinary has 100 seats, the exact same number we have at FIG," Lata explains. "Adam and I just know how to do a restaurant that size."

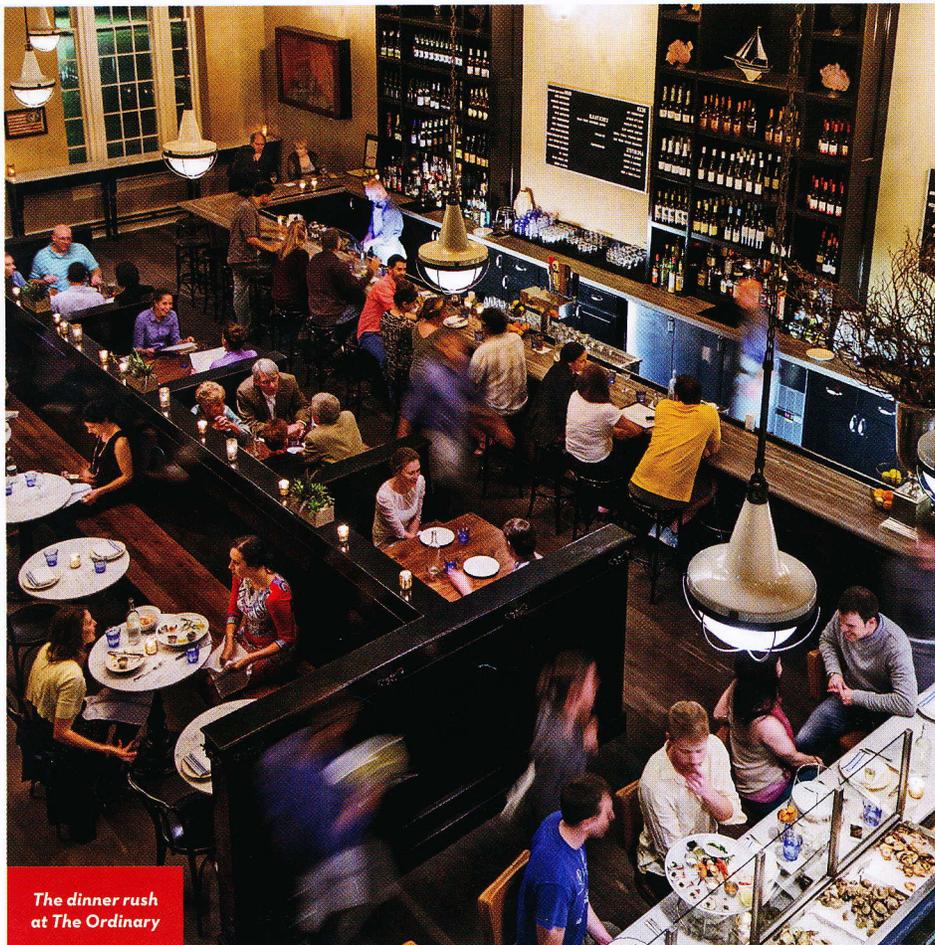
The vibe, though, is markedly different. Where FIG is serene and subdued, The Ordinary's jam-packed bar creates a din that escalates throughout evening. We start with a cocktail called the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, The Ordinary's spin on a classic rum drink from the 1940s. It's citrusy, frothy and delicious, the perfect segue to a dinner from the sea: fried oyster sliders,

which crackle in your mouth with fresh jalapeños and carrots; delicate Nantucket Bay scallops; and triggerfish schnitzel, pounded and lightly fried with lemon, capers and sunchoke.

At the raw bar, Clammer Dave's Capers Blades are perched on a bed of ice next to Otter Island Wilds, Caraquets and Blue Points—each marked by a handwritten label. Earlier, Lata had expressed some reservations about challenging the ancient traditions of steamed oysters and shrimp and grits. "I knew the concept had to be tight," he told me. "Charleston has a savvy local food clientele, and they have a lot of options." Barely a month in, he's selling about 5,000 oysters and clams a week, enough that he's bought massages for his top shuckers on their days off.

"It's not perfect yet," he says. "But we're off to a good start. Nobody is sending anything back." ■

The Ordinary is located at 544 King St. To make a reservation, call 843-414-7060 or go to eattheordinary.com.



The dinner rush at The Ordinary



MIKE LATA'S HOLY CITY CHECKLIST

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