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HIGH TIMES IN THE LOW COUNTRY

Why is Charleston America's favorite city?
CHRISTIAN L. WRIGHT returns to her ancestral
home to dish with the local gentry and finds
an irresistible new buzz in the air

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS





Nicknamed the Holy City for its long history of religious tolerance—and for the dozens of church spires that pierce the low-lying cityscape—Charleston is one of the best American towns to explore on foot. St. Philip's Church, seen here, dates from 1681.

Southern Comfort

WHERE TO STAY

Charleston Place Viewed by many as the town's grande dame. Although she could use a little Bo-tox here and there, she sits right in the thick of things on King Street (843-722-4900; doubles from \$259).

John Rutledge House Inn A 250-year-old house where you can have breakfast in the parlor or coffee on the second-floor piazza, with good views over Broad Street (800-476-9741; doubles from \$260).

Planters Inn This hotel replicates the elegance of a private Charleston house, with Oriental rugs, four-poster beds, European antiques, and staff who take serious pride in their work (843-722-2345; doubles from \$239).

Wentworth Mansion Built as a private residence in 1886, the house has been renovated and repurposed with unique rooms, Tiffany stained glass, afternoon sherry, a spa in the former stables, and an area in the garden for pets (888-466-1886; doubles from \$420).

Zero George If Charleston Place is the city's grande dame, this is its blushing bride: Opened in February, the completely

overhauled hotel brings a chic boutique quality to the antebellum landscape (843-817-7900; doubles from \$349).

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Bin 152 This dignified wine bar with wainscoting and marble-topped café tables brings a hint of the Marais to the corner of King and Queen streets (152 King St.; 843-577-7359).

Butcher & Bee The open kitchen "crafts" sandwiches, but don't let that put you off. The food's very good, there's an herb garden out back, they make bread for McCrady's (below), and it's a late-night draw for chefs after their own restaurants close (654 King St.; 843-619-0202; sandwiches from \$9).

Cypress Craig Deihl, who helms the kitchen, is an artisan of cured meats as well as the latest Charleston chef to be tapped for a James Beard Award (167 E. Bay St.; 843-727-0111; entrées from \$24).

FIG This local favorite with an excellent bar handles grits, shad roe, and pig's trotters as a French chef with a thing for the American South would (232 Meeting St.;

843-805-5900; entrées from \$28).

Gin Joint A neighborhood trendsetter with a leafy patio and bartenders in bow ties who reinvent classic cocktails like whiskey slings and mint juleps (182 E. Bay St.; 843-577-6111).

The Grocery Head to this recent addition to the burgeoning Upper King neighborhood for brunch, if only to taste the bite of its outstanding Bloody Mary (4 Cannon St.; 843-302-8825; brunch dishes from \$8).

Husk From chef Sean Brock, the man behind McCrady's (below). At this, his less formal ode to Southern cooking, the menu might include cornmeal-dusted catfish from North Carolina and wood-fired clams out of McClellanville, South Carolina, from the guy everyone knows as Clammer Dave (76 Queen St.; 843-577-2500; entrées from \$27).

Kudu A coffeehouse that also has interesting beer on tap, this no-frills place gets a mix of college students, computer geeks, and well-heeled locals (4 Vanderhorst St.).

The Macintosh Chef Jeremiah Bacon worked at Le Bernardin and Per

Se in New York before returning to his native town and opening this upscale tavern (479B King St.; 843-789-4299; entrées from \$24).

McCrady's Chef Sean Brock does wonderfully imaginative things with provisions from local farmers, many of them named on the menu (2 Unity Alley; 843-577-0025; entrées from \$27).

The Ordinary Chef Mike Lata and co-owner Adam Nemirow, the team behind FIG, renovated an old bank to house their new oyster bar, where roasted snapper, schnitzel, and fish-and-chips are served on large plates intended to be shared. "If you want to taste Charleston, what better way than an oyster?" says Lata. "They're very different, very salty, and very clean" (544 King St.; 843-414-7060; large plates from \$25).

Two Boroughs Larder With rough-hewn wood, rickety tables, unusual small plates like brussels sprouts with salumi vinaigrette, and a grocery (er, larder) in front, this relative newcomer brings a little Brooklyn to the Holy City (186 Coming St.; 843-637-3722; entrées from \$20). —C.L.W.