



# CHARLESTON CHEWS

**EVENTS & ATTRACTIONS** CHARLESTON COMBINES A SOPHISTICATED ELEGANCE WITH A LAID-BACK STYLE—AND ITS CUISINE, AS SHOWCASED AT THE INCREASINGLY SUCCESSFUL CHARLESTON WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL, IS NO EXCEPTION. NORTH CAROLINIAN ABBE LEWIS REPORTS.

March marked the fifth year of the annual Charleston Wine & Food Festival, a four day event that celebrated local chefs, culinary heritage, and contemporary cuisine of the Charleston region. The festival's goal has always been solidly experiential, allowing guests to make one-on-one contact with participating chefs, winemakers, hoteliers, and authors. Growing in popularity, it has not only gained nationwide exposure but response—reporting 16,500 attendees, a 54 percent increase since its first year, with tickets selling out months in advance.

While Scottsdale, Arizona; South Beach, Florida; New York City; Los Angeles; New Orleans; Aspen, Colorado; St. Michaels, Maryland; and other dominant travel destinations have used wine and food festivals to feather their toques and nests (even Atlantic City, hitting the culinary surf for their second annual), *Forbes Traveler* has already named this spring chicken Charleston gala one of the top five in the United States. “Guests who attend our events leave with a true sense of place,” says Erika McMillan, marketing and media manager of the festival. “They’ve been to the gardens at Middleton Plantation, visited the sea islands for a farm-to-table tour, viewed the city skyline from the neighboring Mt. Pleasant waterfront, and toured a private historical home on a cobblestone-lined street downtown. Guests leave having not only attended the festival but having visited Charleston.”

The cuisine rivals that of any major event. The deep roots of Charleston's culinary culture date back to the era of Triangle Trade, using outside influences from the Caribbean. Being one of the largest ports on the Atlantic coast, goods such as rum, citrus fruits, molasses, and curry helped create some of the area's most emblematic dishes. It's this continuing movement of using these outside sources that sets Charleston apart for a desirable festival destination.

Shedding light on Charleston's cultural history, a new event was added to the agenda: “Wine Around the Garden.” Guests tasted vintages and strolled through America's oldest landscaped gardens at Middleton Place, a 17th century plantation that has survived both revolution and civil war. After the afternoon ramble, **Middleton Place Restaurant** greeted attendees with a farm-to-table spread including on-site chef **Micah Garrison's** duo of fowl: plantation duck confit with Brussels sprouts and cauliflower, and smoked organic chicken with Swiss chard and traditional red-eye gravy. Chef/owner **Fred Neville** of **Fat Hen** dished up a succulent barbecued beef brisket with collards, and **Matt Bolus** of the Art Institute of Charleston served Lowcountry shrimp and grits and deviled eggs with a pancetta twist.

The Charleston Wine & Food Festival has seen some of the country's most celebrated chefs, including **Bobby Flay**, **Tyler Florence**, and **Barbara Lynch**. This year's top toque was **Daniel**



Hobnob through Charleston. Previous page: Sommelier Patrick Emmerson sabsers champagne to kick off the festival. Above, clockwise from left: A selection of cured meats and artisan cheeses at Cypress. Photo by Andrew Cebulka. Charleston Grill's Michelle Weaver and team at the opening night affair. Tomato Pie at Huck's Lowcountry Table. Perfect Pinot Noirs at the 1,000-point wine tasting.

**Boulud**, who hosted an exclusive five course dinner (including pan-seared short rib dumplings and a tasting of Pennsylvania veal that included braised cheeks and seared loin) in a private penthouse overlooking the spectacular skyline of downtown Charleston.

Although such famed chefs have given Charleston great exposure, the true heart and strength of the festival come from the comradeship of the local chefs. At the welcoming party, chefs of 20 local restaurants congregated in a fantastically large tent taking up most of downtown's historic Marion Square, where they proffered tastes from their menus. **Sean Brock** of **McCrary's**, this year's James Beard award-winner for Best Chef Southeast, served up pheasant cooked in hay with turnips, onions, and black truffle. Chef/owner **Jason Murphy** of **Virginia's on King** featured massive plates of the classic South: Virginia meatloaf, mac 'n' cheese, and collard greens. A scallop sevice with *yuzu*, apple mint, and Thai basil could be had at the **Charleston Grill** station with chef **Michelle Weaver**. Guests got the opportunity to taste the fruits of the Atlantic coast in a delicate bouillabaisse by **Frank McMahon** of **Hank's Seafood**.

Lowcountry cuisine showed off its flexibility during a dine-around that featured 18 of the city's award-winning restaurants. Teams of local chefs and nationally recognized peers created indulgent five course meals.

Newly appointed Master Chef of France, **Nico Romo** of **Fish** served up creations inspired by his Lyonnaise background as well as his mentor, **Jose Gutierrez** of the now-defunct **Encore Restaurant** in Memphis. Guests feasted on mini frog's legs *gougères* and succulent duck confit steamed buns; pan-seared vermillion snapper with seasonal vegetables and a lemon thyme/olive oil drizzle; and hazelnut/lemon gâteau with chocolate milk *feuillantine* and raspberry custard for dessert. Romo is the youngest chef to receive the pres-

tigious title of Master Chef; he's also the only chef in the state of South Carolina to hold that distinction, which he shares with 500 esteemed chefs worldwide.

A few blocks down the road, New England transplant chef **Mike Lata** of **FIG** (a clever acronym for "food is good") maintained his local, seasonal, and sustainable mantra in collaboration with **Chris Hastings** of **Hot and Hot Fish Club** (Birmingham, AL) and **Andrew Carmellini** of **Locanda Verde** (New York City). The trio served crudo of redfish with pickled spring vegetables, slow-roasted pork loin with sweet potato and fennel *agrodolce*, and buttermilk *panna cotta* with citrus.

The growth of the Charleston dining scene has made way for new restaurants. **O-Ku**, a new upscale Japanese dining establishment resembling an edgy East Village hot spot housed within traditional Charleston architecture, gave insiders a glimpse of what was soon to open on King Street. Chef **Sean Park** welcomed attendees and passers-by alike to sample his food, which emphasizes fresh ingredients with clean and subtle flavors. "I'd like for diners to realize that sushi and sashimi can be just as delicious, if not more so, without soy sauce," muses Park, who is sure to make a substantive addition to Charleston's food scene.

Sip-and-strolls through King Street, cookbook signings, 1,000-point Pinot Noir tastings, "Beer Schools," battles between Top Chef alums, and countless other events were enjoyed by all. Deemed the party not to be missed, the annual "Bubbles & Sweets" fête showcased an oasis of delightful confections by local pastry greats. The party dons a new theme each year—this year's was to explore the art of the cocktail, long a celebrated pursuit in hospitable Charleston.

Next year's event is scheduled for March 3 to 6. For info: [www.charlestonwineandfood.com](http://www.charlestonwineandfood.com).