

Kiawah Island
Legends
CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF GRACIOUS ISLAND LIVING



Chef Profile: Mike Lata



Food Is Good

by FRANK STITT

The late and revered bon vivant, Johnny Apple of *The New York Times*, discussed a couple of years ago how New Orleans had forever reigned supreme in the quality, depth, and breadth of restaurants in the South. In a post-Katrina world, he felt strongly, however, Charleston had risen with a tidal rush of diverse restaurants, and that of late it had surpassed its Creole sister. I would agree.

Several years before Charleston's dynamic revitalization, restaurants in the old port city were a bit tired—offering she-crab soup and a few Lowcountry dishes in historic if faded rooms. The ingredients were too often sourced from less expensive options. But for the last 10 or 15 years restaurants have opened often here and many have prospered by reason of the flood of tourists seeking Charleston's genuine charm and the availability of fresh, hungry culinary students from nearby academies. The locals who travel and appreciate cuisine in attractive settings have likewise poured out of their south-of-Broad manses and from all over the metropolitan area to these bustling establishments.

Of all the Charleston chefs, Mike Lata of FIG has, in my view, set himself apart, capturing well the soul and flavor of local farmlands and waters. He combines a sensitivity toward ingredients with a passion for flavor in a relaxed, comfortable setting in the old city.

Mike's kitchen is filled with a bounty of local vegetables, salad greens, herbs, dairy, eggs, just-caught shrimp, crabs, and a range of fresh fish. He has made friends also with Emil DeFelice, a renowned pork producer whose hogs come with a thick slab of pork fat to lubricate many a dish. His chicken liver mousse is alone worth the trip, yet don't miss his perfect technique and seasonings of something as basic as a steak tartare. He gives vegetables the status of filet mignon, and his rustic, precise cooking of these sustainably raised vegetables often steal the spotlight from the main course.

The small town vibe of Charleston now has big city choices. Serious foodies might plan several days exploring America's up-and-coming epicurean destination—and be sure to fit in a couple of suppers at the locals' favorite—FIG, Food is Good.

Named as one of the culinary "Legends of the Decade" by Bon Appétit, Frank Stitt is owner and chef of Highlands Bar & Grill and Bottega Café in Birmingham, Alabama. He is also author of Frank Stitt's Southern Table; his most recent book is Bottega Favorita.

