

Dining Out

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A Southern Star Rises in the Lowcountry

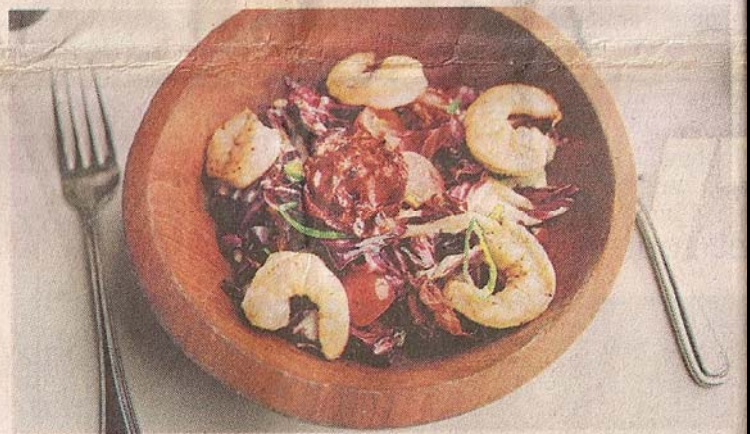
By R. W. APPLE Jr.

CHARLESTON, S.C.

EATING well, very well, is nothing new in the marshy, island-rimmed Lowcountry of South Carolina. The complex and amply documented culinary traditions of this elegant peninsular city and its hinterland stretch back into Colonial times.

In 1742 Eliza Lucas Pinckney, born in Antigua, educated in London, wrote from her family's plantation on Wappoo Creek: "The country abounds with wild fowl, venison and fish. The pork exceeds any I ever tasted anywhere. The turkeys are extremely fine, especially the wild, and indeed all the poultry is exceeding good. Peaches, nectarines and melons of all sorts extremely fine and in profusion." Decades before the Revolution, she cultivated rice and figs, baked macaroons with West Indies coconut and macerated peach kernels in wine, brandy, orange flower water and sugar to produce the cordial ratafia.

Notable early cookbooks were compiled by her daughter, Harriott Pinckney Horry (1770), and another relative, Sarah Rutledge ("The Carolina Housewife," 1847). Miss Rutledge included recipes for shrimp, crabs, oysters and shad — all Charles-



ton mainstays a century and a half later — as well as daubes and ragouts introduced to South Carolina by the French Protestants known as Huguenots. Nor did she omit savory dishes based on ingredients brought by slaves from West Africa, such as okra, sesame seeds (known here as benne, exactly as in Senegal), peanuts

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BOOM TOWN, BIG APPETITE Fig, above, is on Meeting Street in Charleston. Top left, okra gumbo and okra rice at Gullah Cuisine in Mount Pleasant, a Charleston suburb. Near left, the shellfish ceviche at Red Drum in Mount Pleasant has a Southwestern accent.

THERE is much to like about Fig, Mike Lata's pared-down dining room on Meeting Street, Charleston's main stem. Things like the mustardy deviled eggs served while you read the menu, for example, and a warm salad of shrimp, pancetta, radicchio and cherry tomatoes, and a wine list filled with fairly priced, seldom-encountered gems such as Brick House Oregon pinot noir, made by my friend Doug Tunnell, and the matchless Armagnacs of Francis Darroze.

Mr. Lata, a 33-year-old New Englander who came to Charleston by way of New Orleans and Atlanta, turns out a superb hanger steak with caramelized shallots and an old-fashioned bordelaise sauce, and a paprika-infused Portuguese seafood stew. His luscious pudding made with Carolina Gold Rice puts other local versions to shame.

But Fig's strongest suit is vegetables — appropriate enough in a city and a region where the three- or four-vegetable plate lunch remains a treasured tradition.

An adherent of the Slow Food movement, Mr. Lata knows when to gild and when not to. He dresses a billowing bowlful of tender pale green Bibb lettuce, grown on nearby Wadmalaw Island by Dan Kennerty, with freckles of dark green herbs and a sherry vinaigrette, nothing more. His roasted beets are sweet simplicity, too. But he transforms the seasonal produce of Celeste Albers, turning hardy winter chard into a voluptuous gratin and pairing pan-roasted cauliflower with mustard butter. Only the turmeric-flavored cauliflower dishes in India excited me quite as much.

"The food Celeste brings me is so perfect that you're frustrated the rest of the year when you have to make do with the ordinary stuff," Mr. Lata said, and he frets that the proliferation of golf courses, gated residential communities and shopping centers here is squeezing farmers out, narrowing the range of products available to chefs.