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Alluette's, Lulus and Luaus

Marisa Marsey

Have Fork Will Travel

It's hard to tell foodies about a great Charleston restaurant they haven't read about or been to already. The Peninsula Grills, 39 Rue St. Jeans and Charleston Grills are Lowcountry legendary. But if you're headed to the eminently charming Holy City, hit Alluette's Café and remember you heard it here first (before Food Network sings its praises this July, sure to swamp its 30 or so seats plus patio).

Alluette Jones opened this joyful spot with her husband Clifford Smalls last Valentine's Day, proudly noting on her menu that she is not only chef and owner, but also cancer survivor. Stage four, at that.

"Food saw me through it," she says with a radiant smile. "You are what you eat, my friend."

Oh yes, everyone who enters is an instant friend and one Alluette hopes has a long and healthy life feasting on fare free of hormones, antibiotics and all the other things she says we're killing ourselves with. She bills her cuisine as holistic soul food: fresh, local, organic produce; humanely-



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raised cattle and poultry; fish and seafood straight from the Wando River docks daily. Even that Southern staple—sweet tea—gets sweet not from refined sugar but from pineapple juice. Her shrimp, so precious, so lovingly butterflied, delicately dusted with dill and shallow-fried in peanut oil in her Le Creuset pan (because it reminds her of the black cast iron of her Gullah tradition and "what you cook in is as important as what you cook in it"), will become the standard by which you measure all others, those others undoubtedly coming up short. But rather than spoiling things for you, you'll simply be thankful for having been blessed by Alluette's.

Hers is slow food to the core, so plan to stay a while.

"You can't shortcut good food," Alluette explains through the cutout window, opening onto the bar, while she cooks. She chafes at restaurants "with bells and whistles that charge high prices."

Indeed, this is no dolled up Southern belle. Local art adorns the salmon-painted cinderblock walls, tables and chairs are mismatched, and the kitchen is so small that the refrigerator's practically in the dining room, glass blocks forming a divider. Here, it's aura over decor.

As she emerges from the back to dole out her perfect potato salad and positive energy on newcomers ("don't make this your first and last," she'll instruct them at meal's end), a man she obviously knows comes through a side door carrying a box. Her eyes grow wide with delight and a twinkle of tenderness, the kind of look most people reserve for the cutest, cuddliest of puppies.

"Ooh, my veggies," she exclaims as the man from nearby Fields' Farms sets down his delivery of Bibb lettuce and sweet romaine.

Alluette's reverence for food and heritage make this as much a must for any Charleston visitor as the magnificently preserved antebellum mansions of The Battery. Just as their double staircases symbolize open arms, so Alluette's will embrace you, too.

80A Reid Street, Charleston, S.C., 843-577-6926. Lunch and Dinner Mon.-Sat., Brunch Sun. Live jazz Fridays.

## This Richmond Restaurant Really Is A Lulu

Let's set the record straight. Since Lulu's, one of the hippest hangouts in Richmond, opened last fall, most media accounts make it sound like this Shockoe Bottom sure thing is Millie's sibling. There are deep-rooted connections, sure, but the fact is that Lulu's owner is Steve Jurina, veteran chef at the nationally-acclaimed, nearly 20-year old destination "diner." His former boss, Millie's owner Paul Keevil, has only a small interest in Lulu's. It's important to note that this is Jurina's baby because,

while "gild by association" is not necessarily a bad thing, Lulu's can stand on her own two feet. As well as her fabulous sandwiches like belt loosening-worthy BELT (the bonus of egg on sensuously smoky bacon, lettuce and tomato) and entrees (none over \$18) that are equally delectable whether touting Southern stock (fried catfish with fried green tomatoes and okra-sweet corn succotash) or going global (Tandoori style chicken with pappadam, sofrito rubbed roasted pork loin with black beans and lime sour cream sauce). Weekend brunch rocks, too.

Located across the farmers' market from Havana '59, Lulu's wears the industrial chic look of this historic factory-warehouse district well, from brick walls to exposed ductwork. The staff is sincere and proficient, whether serving you at one of the free-form booths (open on each end) or at the bar with a bang-up view of the kitchen talent. First timers are greeted by manager Amy Hardin extending her hand saying, "Hi, I'm Amy, what's your name?" Like Millie's, Lulu's looks to be in it for the long haul.

21 North 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Richmond, 804-343-9771, Lunch Tues.-Fri., Dinner Tues.-Sat, Brunch Sat. & Sun. Occasional live music. [www.lu-lusrichmond.com](http://www.lu-lusrichmond.com)

## Mannino's is Open

Sicilian-born John R. and Culinary Institute of America and Bodega alum John M. Mannino, père et fils (or in this case, padre e figlio), teamed with former Vintage Tavern manager Daris Gavin to bring an Italian bistro to the neighborhoods around Princess Anne Road and Ferrell Parkway (4402 Princess Anne Road, Virginia Beach, 474-4446).

Lowe's are popping up with the frequency of sushi bars in America. The one going into the former Giant Square in Virginia Beach has caused longtime favorite Nara Sushi to relocate to 1115 Independence Plaza, #104, just down the road on the corner of Independence Blvd. and Haygood Rd. (the phone number remains 456-5111). It will be open for business at the new address starting Tuesday, May 27 and owners Eric and Elaine Lee will offer a 10% food discount during the first week there.

## Plate Lunch Luau

If you've spent any time in Hawaii, you probably have fond memories of the lunch wagon. A retooled truck, looking like "the ice cream man," parks off-road, unfurls an awning and dishes out filling plate lunches—typically a meat with two scoops of rice and one scoop of another side such as macaroni

salad – to famished surfers. That stomach-satisfying, aloha spirit is poised to ride a wave of popularity on the mainland.

Pat Adalem recently opened his independent Aloha Hawaiian BBQ (not related to similarly named franchises in other states), a casual, counter-service restaurant showcasing #50's food: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Hawaiian, American cuisines shaken together as if on the hips of a hula dancer. Adalem, who also owns three Bangkok Garden Thai restaurants with his sister, was raised on Oahu (his stepfather was Hawaiian) and served in the U.S. Army (including in Kuwait during Desert Storm) before settling here.

Delicious dishes eaten indoors at five booths, outdoors at a few picnic tables or taken away (Adalem plans to expand in a few months) include kalua pork with cabbage (slow-roasted, shredded pork mixed with cabbage) and a combo with BBQ chicken, BBQ beef and short ribs. There's even a vegetarian pad thai with tofu as well as an archipelago of sauces and condiments - sweet and sour kalbi, incendiary Sriracha and teriyaki sauces, hot pickled peppers and ketchup—to dress your platter. How authentic is Aloha? Pretty darn, judging by the recent special starring that more prevalent-than-poi island mainstay: Spam. •

5260 Princess Anne Road, Virginia Beach, 499-5999. Open daily from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Catering available. [www.alohahawaiianbbqva.com](http://www.alohahawaiianbbqva.com)

Got restaurant news? Contact Marisa Marsey at [almaport@aol.com](mailto:almaport@aol.com).

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