

Charleston Chow

Thoughts and Opinions on Charleston Area Restaurants by a Seasoned Restaurant Critic

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Welcome to Charleston Chow!

I hope that you find my weekly journal of the latest and greatest in Charleston, SC area world of food and restaurants and restaurant reviews/overviews to be informative and enjoyable. I promise to utilize the utmost credibility and honesty, just as I employed when I was restaurant critic at The Post and Courier. The Charleston food world is our oyster. Let's dig in and eat!



About Me

Holly Herrick

I am a classically trained chef with a Grand Diplome from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, France and a nationally awarded food journalist. My professional

Get Wrecked!

Bone up on locally sustainable wreckfish in the recently released issue of Lowcountry Living Magazine. My column, Delectable Delights, explores where this meaty, clean-tasting fish lives and how it's fished to ensure it gets to your plate on fresh time. Local chefs Nico Romo (Fish Restaurant), Frank McMahon (Hank's Seafood Restaurant) and yours truly provide simple and delectable ideas on how to prepare wreckfish at home. Click on the link (left) or look for the July/August issue on stands near you.



Tuesday, February 19, 2008

Gotta' Getcha' Geechee

It is tragic that a region built on rice and the Gullah foods and customs born of Africa's "Rice Coast" has so little to show for it in our present-day culture, particularly our restaurant food culture. The language, once so prominently ringing through the streets of Charleston and the marshes of Lowcountry barrier islands, has dwindled to an ebbing murmur of days past. The food, characterized by rice, lima beans and other native African ingredients is still around, but mostly dapples restaurant menus as opposed to fully showcasing them, unless you count (once again) "soul food" restaurants.

Alluette's Cafe is the latest ode to local soul food, but owner Alluette Jones-Smalls throws a surprising twist into the usual soul food equation. Alluette's is "holistic" serving "fresh, local organic produce and dry goods when available". In addition, as the menu states, all meats are "free of

experience includes catering, culinary tours, newspaper and magazine writing with an emphasis on food, including restaurant reviewing, original recipes, features, and more. My work has appeared in Southern regional publications as well as national publications - including Southern Living, Gourmet and Bon Appetit. Currently, I am working on two books on the subjects of dining in greater Charleston, SC and a cookbook. Go to www.hollyherrick.com for more information and to see samples of my published work.

[View my complete profile](#)



Holly's Favorites: Four/ Five Star Food That Won't Break the Bank

- 39 Rue de Jean (French)
- Al di La (Northern Italian)
- Alluette's Cafe (Holistic Soul Food)
- Amazon Grill (Brazilian)
- Basil (Thai)
- Buffalo South (Wings and more)
- Carolina's (Southern/Continental)
- Charleston Crepe Company
- El Bohio (Cuban)
- EVO (Fire-Roasted Pizza)
- Fat Hen (Lowcountry French)

hormones, nitrates, artificial color and sulfites." Rice and soy milk are the restaurant's accepted substitutes for dairy. There is one more thing, Alluette's does not serve or cook with pork.

What? No pig in a soul food joint? How can this be, you might ask. I asked Alluette myself when I entered the recently opened restaurant on a sunny afternoon; the light casting a pink hue on the coral, cinder-block walls like a sunset on winter marsh grasses. Her resistance to cooking with pork (and pairing certain foods) does go back to religion, but not because she's Muslim as I'd clumsily implied in my awkward query. It has to do with the teachings of the book of Leviticus from the Old Testament of the bible. She told me so. I researched it after returning home from a soulful and savory lunch here and learned that eating pork and other divided-hoofed animals that do not chew their cud is listed as off-limits in Chapter 11 for various reasons that essentially relate to respecting the body, spirituality and God.

Whatever your beliefs (or Alluette's) on such matters, there is no doubt that she is committed to preparing body-friendly foods and has been granted the talent (along with executive chef Absalom Thomas) to make it taste divine. Originally from Mount Pleasant, Jones-Small recently sold a successful restaurant on St. Helena island near Beaufort to set up shop in this understated setting situated smack dab in the middle of the up-and-coming Midtown area of the peninsula, because, as she told me, "Charleston is where I need to be right now."

She's re-roosted in a big way. The restaurant is far from fancy. The small is space dominated with an eclectic array of mis-matched tables and chairs and a huge blackboard posting the days specials for breakfast, lunch and dinner; all this flanked by a rundown looking courtyard with a tattered link fence. Still, it's attractive, clean, absolutely homey, appropriate and intelligent. Regarding the latter, I'd far rather see a small, family run business sink their funds into the food as opposed to the sometimes suffocating overhead of fancier digs.

• ~~Fiery Ron's Hometown BBQ (BBQ)~~

- FIG (American/Eclectic)
- Fishnet Seafood (Fish/Soulfood)
- Five Loaves Cafe (Soups/Sandwiches/
Vegetarian Friendly)
- Glass Onion (Southern/Locally driven)
- Hominy Grill (Southern/Soul)
- Jack's Cosmic Dogs (Hotdogs)
- Jasmine Porch
- Jestine's Kitchen (Southern/Soul)
- Johnny's (Hotdogs)
- Langdon's (American/Eclectic)
- Med Bistro (Deli/Neighborhood Bistro)
- Mellow Mushroom (Pizza)
- Moe's Crosstown/Downtown Tavern
(Burgers/Sandwiches)
- Momma Brown's (Barbecue)
- Mondo's Delite (Italian)
- Monza (Neopolitan Pizza)
- Nirlep (Indian)
- Palais de Jade (Chinese)
- Pane e Vino (Italian)
- Poe's Tavern (Burgers and Such)
- Raval (Spanish-style Tapas)
- Red Drum Gastropub (Southwestern)
- Red Orchid (Chinese)
- Santi's (Mexican)
- Social (Tapas/Wine Bar)
- Soif Wine, Cheese & Tapas Bar
- The Lettered Olive
- Tristan (American/Eclectic)
- Virginia's on King (Southern)

That's what Alluette's does. The investment is in the food, the preparation and the startling friendly and sincere staff, beginning with Alluette's firm handshake, hello and introduction she offers her guests upon arrival. When she's not doing that, she's standing behind a small window in a small kitchen whisking and stirring myriad pots and bowls, seemingly sprinkling them with the pixie dust of Geechie culinary magic. The food is so clean and pure tasting, you don't even miss the pig, even in the collards which seemed infused with a blend of seasonings you might otherwise taste in dill pickles.

But, there's no telling, at least not from Alluette. She doesn't share her recipes, according to our maternally warm server. That includes the magical mystery tea (\$1.80 per glass) that is blended with a series of fresh fruit juices (no sugar added!) and served over plenty of ice. I thought I sensed a mix of mango, papaya and apricot in just the right amount blended into my delicious brew that just kept coming whenever I said the word and even when I didn't.

Alluette buys her vegetables locally from Joseph Fields and also is loyal to St. Helena Island purveyor, Barefoot Farms. The freshness of Lowcountry produce burst through every ounce of the fresh baby lima bean soup (\$4.50, cup) and the tomato-based fish stew (\$5, cup). I particularly appreciated the former which, in its clean, savory broth and 100% lima bean purity, was quintessential simplicity seasoned only with salt and a dash of cayenne pepper provided on the table. Only talented chefs with devotion to fresh produce can make something so simple and pure taste so good without getting heavy-handed. Put this one on your must-order list. The fish stew's high notes were in the veggies - threads of spinach, chunks of carrots, sweet tomatoes - all brought together with fresh bites of basil.

"Baked Chicken" (\$9.95) with one side (the aforementioned collards) seems like an overly-humble misnomer for this juicy, wholesome rendition of thyme-seasoned perfection. This just spoke to my heart and made me think of easier, simpler times. The feel-good, taste-delicious mood carried



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over to the Angus steak sandwich special (8.95), layered with 1/4" thick slices of pure beef, tangy cheddar cheese, a warm, caramelized red onion, and slivers of yellow peppers on a chewy, toasted baguette. This was served with a small cup of a tangy/sweet, crunchy slaw peppered with celery seed and a crisp, cold pickle.

Unlike a lot of soul food restaurants where food (though delicious) can feel heavy, I left Alluette's Cafe feeling light and satisfied. My belly was comfortably full and my soul was happy. I felt like I had made a solid investment in time well-spent. Speaking of time, keep in mind that it's not hurried, and at times may feel a little slow if you're not accustomed to food being cooked to order as it is here. Be patient. You'll be glad you did.

Brand new, Alluette's is still working out the kinks on little things (like a non-functioning credit card machine the day I was there), but gets almost everything right. In the future, the restaurant plans to offer cooking classes and serve alcohol. For now, settle into some of that tea and have a good ole' holistic Geechee good time. I'm planning to head back for breakfast. I can't wait to dig into "Hey Y'all"...Savory Sardines with Caramelized Onions and Olive Oil served over Local Stone Ground Hominy Grits (\$5.50). Doesn't that just sound Geechee delicious?

Alluette's Cafe

80 Reid Street, downtown

(843) 577-6926



Mon., B/L, 8 a.m.-3 p.m.

Tues., B/L/D, 8 a.m.-9 p.m .

Wed.-Sat., B/L/D/Late night bites, 8 a.m.- 2 a.m.

Sun., Brunch, 11 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Live Music sometimes offered on Friday and Saturday evenings, 10:30 p.m. - 2 a.m.

Posted by Holly Herrick at 12:05 PM  

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