

German Tastebuds, Gullah Tastebuds

One neat thing about living in South Carolina is the availability of disparate food traditions. And you're liable to find any of it anywhere—Low Country Boil in the upstate, for example.

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by Tim Driggers

I'll never forget the day my father purchased my first car. It was the August before my freshman year at Newberry College. A Pontiac GTO would have been nice, an MG, or one of those sporty James Bond models. My father, however, had a far different notion.

What I saw driving into the yard that summer afternoon was horrifying. This jalopy looked as if it were built by aliens from some planet on the Four Holes Swamp side of the twilight zone. To this day I cannot really describe the rather strange look of a 1961 Plymouth Valiant. It was the worse thing I had ever seen, and it was mine.

There's a scene in *Animal House* where Bluto and Delta House are expelled from Faber College. Their response: ROAD TRIP! At Newberry College, my battered junkyard on wheels found its purpose for existence. A big exam the next morning; a letter from the draft board; flunking out. Not to worry. ROAD TRIP! More often than not, our road trips involved food. We'd stow the necessities—hot dogs from the Martin Street beer hall—and hit the road.

The road trip tradition continues. In our current tour, we get behind the wheel to visit Cheraw

and the German-American cuisine at Oskars; travel to St. Helena Island for a helping of collard greens and Gullah culture at The Gullah Grub; and cruise over to Lake Thurmond in McCormick for Coach Joe Crosby's Low-Country Boil—food so good, why I'd even get in that Plymouth Valiant again.

Oskars Restaurant And Bar, Cheraw

I visited Oskars Restaurant and Bar in Cheraw one cold, wet winter night. It didn't take me long to discover this was going to be a memorable experience. In fact, I knew it the moment I stepped out of the freezing rain into the cozy foyer and was greeted by a woman with a smile wider than the nearby Great Pee Dee River. Legend has it Sherman's army spared Cheraw because they just liked the town. If Uli Mossig had been around in those days, no doubt Sherman would have gone a step further and enlisted in the Confederacy. That's the power of Uli's personality. To the undying gratitude of legions of devoted diners, the menu matches Uli's wit and charm.

Second Avenue hasn't always been the home of Oskars. Cheraw hasn't always been the home of

Uli and Helmut. Born in Wolfsburg, Germany, home of the Volkswagen Beetle, the couple moved here in 1973. Helmut worked at INA, a German bearings manufacturer. Uli found a job as secretary for local chiropractor Prue Owens.

"We have about 20 German couples living in Cheraw," said Helmi Helmutraud, who with husband Bernd were already living in town when Uli and Helmut arrived. "There is a German word to describe how we socialize: *gemutlichkeit*, which means a comfortable togetherness. That's how we feel when we get together and dine. In Germany, you don't just eat and leave. You stay around and enjoy each others company." Uli and Helmut decided in 1999 to bring *gemutlichkeit* to the Cheraw restaurant scene.

"Helmut and I had dreamed about opening a restaurant for 20 years," Uli said, "but were scared of going in debt." Finally, with the help of Oskar Wetternek, a friend from INA, they acquired a small place on Second Avenue and started to renovate. Soon afterward, the adjoining space became available. On March 31, 2000, Oskars was born. Wetternick, the namesake of the restaurant, retired last year, bequeathing many of his recipes and

cooking styles to present chef John Linton.

The main dining room is attractively decorated with art on the walls and seating for 75 at tables adorned with green cloths topped with white lattice. On the night I visited the room was packed and the mood decidedly upbeat. Uli suggested I start with an "appe teaser" of frog legs, crab meat muffin bites and stuffed mushrooms. The combination was fabulous—frog legs lightly fried and so tasty, I momentarily considered grabbing a gig, heading to the river, and bringing Linton more croakers for his kitchen. The crab meat muffin bites were beyond delicious—premium lump crab bound with a creamy cheese mixture. The mushrooms, stuffed similarly, were pure heaven.

I could have paid my bill and left then, a happy man, but the meal had just begun. Uli was again at my table with a plate of jaegerschnitzel, a cutlet of pork splashed with mushroom gravy (\$12.95) and accompanied by potato dumplings and red cabbage. What a feast.

Beside other German favorites such as wiener-schnitzel (\$13.95) and zigeunerschnitzel (\$12.95), Oskars features an American menu with entrées including shrimp and scallops in wine sauce (\$15.95), shrimp and grits (\$12.95), cornish hen (\$11.95), stuffed orange roughy or tilapia (\$15.95), marjoram noodles with pork tenderloin (\$10.95) and chicken cordon bleu

(\$12.95). There are assorted salads, soups, desserts, "oskarettes" (the children's menu), wines and both imported and domestic beers. Oskars' bar, leading from the restaurant entrance, is where friends linger long into the evening.

Dr. Owens eats here at least twice a week. "I think of it as home," he said. "Helmut and Uli always join me for my meal. It's not like other restaurants where I feel like I'm dining alone." His favorite meal is shrimp and grits. "The grits are not cooked like plain grits. They are cooked with real cream and are much better." Helmsraud agreed—"and I don't come from a grits country." She is a fan of the rouladen, beef thinly cut, in a roll with onions, pickle, mustard, spices and gravy. Dr. Owens gives his own guarantee. "If you come here and don't like the food, I'll pay for it." No takers have been found.

"We want our diners to feel like they're eating in our living room," Uli said. "When they leave, we want them to feel like they are part of our family."

If being adopted into Uli and Helmut's family means I can eat at Oskars every week, I'm all for it.

OSKARS RESTAURANT AND BAR, 130 Second Ave., Cheraw; (843) 320-0303. Lunch Monday-Friday, 11-2; dinner Monday-Saturday, 5:30-10; bar opens at 5:30 p.m. Smoking allowed. Reservations are preferred. Checks, credit cards okay.

The Gullah Grub, St. Helena Island

Dining at **The Gullah Grub** restaurant on St. Helena Island is much more than a meal; it is an exploration of the Gullah culture and heritage of the sea islands. It's a history that chronicles the subjugation of tribes from West Africa and their relocation to southern plantations. It's an oral tradition passed from generation to generation in a rich dialect extolling the virtues of spirituality rooted in nature and family. The food of the Gullah people is expressed with clarity and passion at The Gullah Grub.

Sitting at a crossroads on Highway 21 across the street from the Penn School (the first school for freed slaves in South Carolina), the one-room restaurant is filled with Gullah artifacts and the spirit of a community constantly buffering itself from the onslaught of coastal development. The restaurant represents not only a food tradition but a people's hope for economic betterment and survival of their culture.

"About 90 percent of our customers are from out of town," said William "Bubba" Green III, who with father Bill—one of the last Gullah deer drivers—operates The Gullah Grub. "On St. Helena Island, we have a connection with the things around us. We are rooted in the ground and environment and our food is a reflection of those values."

I met Nancy McFarland from Cape Town, South Africa, and her boyfriend David Campbell from Palo Alto, California, at The Gullah Grub. "I've always been fascinated by history and cultural identities," David said, downing a plate of red rice and shrimp gumbo. "It's intriguing to fathom the depth and soul of the Gullahs and their African ancestry."

"I love the indigenous food of the Gullahs and the cultural expression of this restaurant," Nancy said, sipping she-crab soup and "swamp water." I dined on catfish chowder, collard greens and red rice, choosing from a menu of fried shark strips, barbecue ribs and chicken, shrimp, fried fish, and shrimp gumbo. Prices are \$7.99 to \$12.95.

Bubba and his family are from James Island but lived for years on Middleton Plantation, where they learned from some of the great Low Country cooks. "In 1989, my father began marketing his freshwater catfish chowder under the Oshi's Finest label," Bubba said. "Over the next 10 years, Oshi's Finest expanded to include crab soup, Bill's BBQ sauce, and gumbo. In 1999, it seemed Gullah became something to be proud to be a part of. Our forefathers were people of their environment—the sea and the land—people of deep spirituality and happiness who loved God and His creation." With help from the South Carolina Coastal Community Development Corporation, The Gullah Grub was born.