

It is an eye-opener to peruse “Local Interest” bookshelves. The Waldenbooks in the Charleston Place complex, for one, carries 14 racks of Charlestoniana. There are titles like *The Majesty of Charleston*, and one glossy doorstopper devoted simply to the *Cornices of Charleston*. There are books about gardens, and plantations, and “Low Country” everything. A number of works celebrate the Gullah tradition of the Sea Island African-Americans and their pricey woven-sweetgrass baskets. (One woman weaving away on Meeting Street quoted me a price of \$450 for a small handled basket and added, “But you can haggle with me!” Which must be something like what spiders say to flies.)

You may never love the Holy City quite as much as the Charlestonians themselves, but you’ve got to hand it to them: The place is a knockout.

You fall under the city’s spell just wandering about this peninsula originally settled in 1670, its narrow lanes overhung with crepe myrtle, pecan, dogwood, magnolia, palms, and live oak.

Preservation is big business here, tourism-wise, and the regulators of the ever-expanding Historic District take it very seriously. In these precincts, according to local writer Jack Bass, the Board of Architectural Review is “feared more by some than the IRS.” Although a native eye can pick out what has disappeared, to a visitor streets like Legare (Le-GREE), Church, and Meeting—built on the original high ground of the once marshy city—appear seamlessly intact, a trove of pre-Revolutionary War and 18th- and 19th-century homes, brick carriage houses, old slave quarters, and pocket gardens. There are shady, secret-seeming passageways like Philadelphia Alley off Queen Street, and navigational

hazards like the huge cobblestones on Chalmers Street made from ballast stones discarded from old ships. There are historic homes open to the public, including the 1808 Nathaniel Russell House on Meeting Street’s Museum Mile, meticulously restored down to its ornate plasterwork and famous “flying staircase,” and the picturesquely crumbling 1818 Aiken-Rhett House. You may walk around for days with words like *cartouche* and *fluted pilaster* knocking around in your head.

The intriguing sense of a rich interior life going on behind the walls and wrought iron gates is stoked by the glimpse of a playful courtyard fountain here, a perfect English garden there. It’s an itch you’ll only scratch during the spring and fall garden and home tours. Unless you peek between the trash cans in back.

“Just stay close and be quiet,” says my friend, an Old Charlestonian whose roots go back to the first colonial governor. Before I realize what we’re up to, she has led me off the street, down an alley, through the back gate, and between the garbage cans behind a grand house. There is a garden she wants me to see on the sly, one she played in as a child and is frankly a little miffed to find occupied these days by someone “from off.”

Off the peninsula, that is. “When I grew up here, we all knew everyone in these houses,” she had told me. “Not in most of them, in *every* one.” Her youth as an SOB—someone living in the hallowed blocks “South of Broad” Street—was spent immersed in a complete, now-mostly-vanished world. Charleston Day School, Cotillion, East Bay (now Hazel Parker) playground, St. Michael’s church, the Carolina Yacht Club—all were within a few blocks. “I don’t recall my mother ever picking anyone up in a car,” she says.

Classic French meets Southern renaissance (bottom left): Chef Mike Lata of FIG (Food Is Good) and his chalkboard menu crediting FIG’s family-farm suppliers. Anglo-Southern style at Ben Silver’s on King Street (bottom right).

