

# Meet Chef Mike Lata

## Fig Means Gourmet Dining in Charleston

by Doc Lawrence

Mike Lata's passion for food started a thousand miles north of Charleston in western Massachusetts, where he developed a strong sense of the seasons. Early on, Lata decided to make a career as a chef and soon found himself at the heart of New England regional cookery, developing a real passion for seafood. In New Orleans, he worked for the Brennan family and eventually landed at Ciboulette in Atlanta. In early 1998, he was recruited to be the executive chef at Anson in Charleston and saw Anson host the first out-of-house James Beard Event in South Carolina. In 2001, he spent time in Nice and Dijon working in Michelin star restaurants. Upon his return, he teamed up with former Anson manager Adam Nemirow to create FIG (Food Is Good), an approachable neighborhood bistro.

*Chef Lata joined Doc Lawrence for this interview.*

**Doc:** *What is your underlying philosophy regarding your relationship with food choices, cooking styles and menu preparation for FIG?*

**Chef Lata:** FIG's menu is incredibly seasonal. Our top priority, like many of our peers, is making sure we select the highest-quality of ingredients. When ingredients are prepared seasonally, they don't have to be messed with as much, and the finished product inspires our cooks, our servers, and our customers. Our mantra in the FIG kitchen can be best summed up as a passion for pure flavor — we need our dishes to reflect our passion for ingredients. We aren't talking about anything too terribly exotic — simple things like a sweet summer tomato, bright, crisp asparagus and freshly dug potatoes are things that truly inspire the dishes at FIG. I feel strongly that the most familiar ingredients can evoke the strongest connections with the customer. Most of the time, ingredient selection makes or breaks our cuisine. We often tweak our menu both before and sometimes even during service to make sure everything we put out there is the best it can be. We feel that no matter what happens, so long as our guests receive well-executed, delicious and seasonal food, they will be happy and they will return again!

**Doc:** *Much like an accomplished opera star or a legendary athlete, every great chef seems to have a few heroes who are primary influences. Who are your heroes and influences, and why do you admire them?*

**Chef Lata:** Throughout my years working in other restaurants across the country, I have never had a true mentor in the kitchen. My path to FIG, while fulfilling, has had its frustrations, not to mention a very steep learning curve. What has taken me years to figure out has probably been traditionally passed from chef to sous chef in a fraction of the time. I wish I could tell stories about the incredible discipline it took to advance in the great kitchens of France and draw from those experiences while shaping my own vision, but I honestly cannot. So, the next best thing for me has been to learn from the books of the chefs that

represent excellence to me. I have learned a vast amount by studying greats like Robuchon, Boulud, Ducasse, Girardet and the Troisgros brothers. I am particularly inspired by Roger Verge's work with vegetables. I also have a deep love for Californian cuisine and the chefs that have defined it — Alice Waters, Jeremiah Towers and, most recently, Suzanne Goin. Here in the South, Anne Quatrano and Frank Stitt are people I look up to and strive to emulate. I would be remiss not to include my good friend Celeste Albers, a local grower and empress of quality who has taught me what great raw products taste like and the commitment it takes to produce them.

I have a true respect for my craft and its evolution. The French chefs I mentioned symbolize excellence, which should always come through in the food you present. The others more reflect my personal style — a cuisine that is regional, seasonal and soulful.

**Doc:** *You worked in New Orleans for the legendary Brennan family and had prominent stints in New England, France and Atlanta. What parts of these experiences have you been able to borrow from and incorporate into the operation of FIG?*

**Chef Lata:** I've always been a sponge and taken both the good and the not-so-good from each restaurant experience. Martha's Vineyard ignited my passion for seafood. I knew, as a chef, if you could prepare great seafood, you would always have fans. In New Orleans, I learned that good food had a lot to do with your surroundings. I had my first Chef de Cuisine position in Atlanta and had the life-changing opportunity to develop relationships with a network of local farmers, whose seasonal products I incorporated into my menus nightly.

My time in France satisfied the romantic in me. I saw perfect vegetables, birds in plume, perfectly ripe cheeses and tasted a real Bouillabaisse. Most importantly, I learned that enjoying a meal is a state of being ... or culture as it were for me there.

**Doc:** *You are a high-profile leader in Charleston's Slow Food movement. Why, in your opinion, should this be important to diners and the local culinary culture?*

**Chef Lata:** I cannot express the significance in supporting your local agriculture. When you dine at FIG in Charleston, you taste produce grown in the Lowcountry's distinc-



tive sandy soil, fish caught in our briny waters and livestock raised on our pastures, all by people that I have gotten to know and grown to love. One might say that it is a responsibility to support these efforts, with which I agree, but I do so with great pleasure. Most importantly, it preserves our distinctive culinary culture, of which we are the direct benefactors. But honestly, that just scratches the surface of the issue for me!

*Doc: You often refer to your commitment to using locally grown products. How is being located in Charleston advantageous for you as a chef with an eye toward obtaining these? And does the Charleston region offer some unique products?*

**Chef Lata:** Charleston is in the midst of an exciting culinary renaissance. In the last 10 years, I have seen both growers and chefs alike rally to solidify our reputation as a food town. That said, the standouts for me are easy — our local shrimp is the single best product Charleston has to offer. Close runners-up are our fish and other seafood, Carolina Gold rice and greens. We also have damn good figs, too!

*Doc: What factors do you use in selecting wines for FIG, and what is the relationship between the wines that are available and the menu you compose?*

**Chef Lata:** Our wine program is as exciting as the cuisine at FIG, which is headed up by my friend and business partner, Adam Nemirow. We can basically break the program down to a few basic philosophies. First, the wines are chosen based on their relationship to our cuisine, which means the list reflects seasonality. In the summer, the list is loaded with refreshing whites and rosés to complement the lighter style of cooking. In the winter, you will find that reds dominate, which pair better with some of our meat ragouts and the like. Second, we have a value-driven list, which doesn't necessarily mean the wines are cheap, but that you get a lot of bang for your buck. Adam goes through great lengths to ensure, no matter which bottle our guests order, that they will enjoy a carefully chosen wine that reflects the quality and character of the grape that was used and/or the region in which it was produced. Most of our wines are small production, which means that our list changes almost as much as our menu. The good news for our guests is that Adam doesn't believe in coveting the wines — if we have it and it's ready to drink, it will be on the list and at a fair price.

*Doc: Thank you.*

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