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## DINING OUT IN CHARLESTON, Part Two

by John Mariani

This beautiful antique city has long needed a restaurant like **Fig** (232 Meeting Street; 843-805-5900; [www.eatatfig.com](http://www.eatatfig.com)), now two years old, for it is a place that cannily melds the old traditions of Low Country cooking with complete modernity and a great deal of personal taste under Chef-partner Mike Lata and partner-manager Adam Nemirow. It's a pretty place (*below*), not "no-frills" but without pomp, simply decorated, and very warmhearted.

A few years back Louis Osteen tried to do much the same thing on this same street, but Charleston apparently wasn't ready for it, and Osteen moved on successfully to Pawley's Island. Now, it appears, the city is proud to have a place like Fig (which is decidedly no relation to Todd English's chain restaurants named Figs), which is not only smart but has a buzz no other place in town has been able to match. It's unquestionably a foodie destination, but a wholly unpretentious one.

In so many ways, despite numerous international



flourishes, Fig's menu is quintessentially modern American, starting with the idea that good food begins with good ingredients treated simply. Thus, you take one sip of Lata's lovely butternut squash soup with a touch of nutmeg and a lacing of crème fraîche and you taste the squash first and foremost, fresh and sweet all on its own. His caramelized onion tart with Niçoise olives and white anchovies might go by the name *pissaladière* in France, but it seems right at home in the Low Country. Even moreso, the warm shrimp with pancetta and radicchio hits just the right notes of taste and texture, and ricotta cavatelli with broccoli, pecorino cheese, and a little olive oil is perfect.

Move on to entrees and you'll be delighted by his rendering of roast suckling pig with red Russian kale, roasted beets, and tangy grain mustard, and you won't find a better roast chicken, served with broccoli and hakuri turnips, in town, even if this bird ain't fried. Swordfish can so easily be a few days older than it should be at a restaurant, but Lata's was pristinely fresh, crusted with mustard and served with a little veal *jus* and roasted spring onions, while skate wing was sautéed just past translucence and served with French beans, the crunch of hazelnuts, shallots and the traditional brown butter.

So few ingredients buoy so much flavor at Fig, evidenced in the Fuji apple tarte Tatin with good vanilla ice cream;



outstanding was the vanilla crème brûlée unencumbered by scads of garnishes; a half-baked, that is, soft centered, chocolate cake was as good as any I've tasted, but there was an odd, almost medicinal flavor in some Carolina Gold rice pudding with cherries and black walnuts. Artisanal cheeses are also available, and there is a bar menu of deviled eggs, steak tartare, chicken liver pâté, and other items.

Fig's winelist is admirable for its internationalism, judicious size, and decent pricing, with very few bottlings that will be overly familiar to wine lovers.

Fig does what it does so well because it lacks all pretension, substituting instead devotion to the proposition that you shouldn't mess with the best ingredients and that most people will get the message. And with starters between \$6-\$10 and entrees \$19-\$23, this may be the best priced