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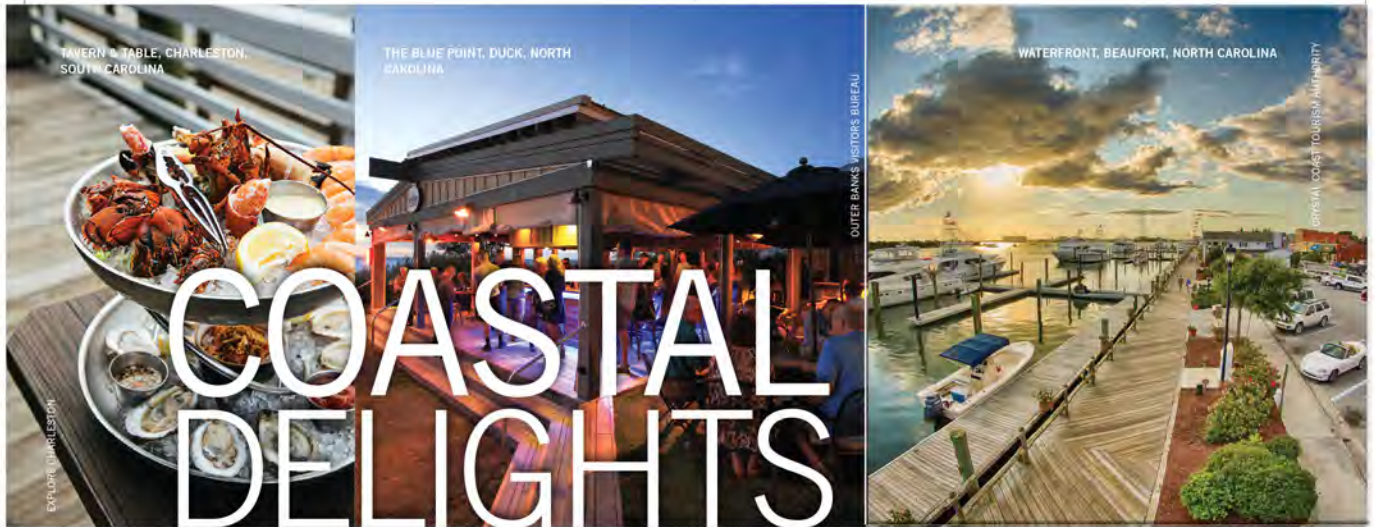


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The Coastal Carolinas is swimming with unique group dining options

BY TYLER DAVIDSON

The coast of North and South Carolina is a culture onto its own, with food and beverage options that truly showcase the region's cuisine heritage for visiting meetings groups.

Following are three venues that celebrate that heritage through food, and while the pandemic has put the brakes on large gatherings throughout the world at the time of publication, they remain good bets for when we can meet en masse again.

With delicacies that include Gulf Stream-caught yellowfin tuna, crab cakes and deep-fried softshell blue crab that you need to jump on in season before they run out, the Coastal Carolinas offers a feast of land and sea that is unmatched.

The capacity information provided below reflects a non-COVID-19 environment when social distancing is not required, so be sure to contact each establishment to determine current allowances or availability.

NORTH CAROLINA Outer Banks

Perhaps the quintessential embodiment of the North Carolina coast, the Outer Banks, or OBX for short, is a relatively undeveloped little slice of heaven where lazy days are spent lounging on its sandy beaches and

enjoying an abundance of fresh seafood.

"Food is an essential part of the OBX experience, with much of it coming directly from the sea to the table. Everyone down here has a fisherman in their family and we just add the Southern hospitality—plus the grits!" said Pam Gutlon, resident innkeeper at the eight-room White Doe Inn, located on the Roanoke Island town of Manteo, a popular destination for OBX visitors as well as for executive retreats.

The White Doe took the pandemic seriously, purchasing HEPA air filters, UV lighting and implementing stringent cleaning protocols in its guest rooms and public spaces, as well as serving its standard four-course gourmet offering to guests in individually packaged servings.

"Stay small, stay safe is our motto, as gathering in a much more controlled environment now is especially important," Gutlon said.

Outside the walls of the historic B&B, Gutlon recommends the following two restaurants for a memorable group dining experience.



OUTER BANKS VISITORS BUREAU
AVENUE WATERFRONT GRILLE, MANTEO, NORTH CAROLINA

■ **Tortuga's Lie**, located in Nags Head, has been featured on Guy Fieri's Diners Drive-Ins and Dives and named the No. 1 Seafood Dive in North Carolina by *Coastal Living Magazine*.

■ **Avenue Waterfront Grille**, in downtown Manteo, can seat up to 50 and boasts a waterfront location, open floor plan and menu items that include Maple Pecan Fried Chicken, Bayou Shrimp and Grits, Tuna Sushi Style, Fish Tacos and a DownSouth Burger seasoned with a splash of hard cider barbecue sauce. Ample vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free dishes are also available.

Other OBX options include:

■ **Duck's The Blue Point** waterfront restaurant, helmed by James Beard nominee chef Sam McGann and with an outdoor thebackBAR venue that can seat up to 25.

■ **Basnight's Lone Cedar**, which overlooks Roanoke Sound and can accommodate groups up to 100 for a buyout, and features wild caught seafood straight from the docks in Nags Head, including crab cakes, shrimp and flounder.

Crystal Coast

Stretching some 85 miles from Cape Look-out National Seashore to the New River, the Crystal Coast's main town is Beaufort, a historic enclave with three restaurants that may even allow diners the opportunity while gathered for an offsite event to see the area's famed wild horses roaming free at Taylor's

Creek and Rachel Carson Reserve.

- **Moonrakers** is a new restaurant specializing in coastal cuisine that features a rooftop terrace where diners may also glimpse dolphins swimming along Taylor's Creek. Its second-floor Concorde Gallery private event space can hold up to 80 to enjoy waterfront views. A full restaurant buyout can accommodate up to 140 guests.
- Beaufort Hotel's new **34° North Restaurant & Bar** also boasts a terrace overlooking the city's marina and Taylor's Creek, and serves locally inspired Eastern North Carolina cuisine that includes local "dock to dish" seafood and hand-cut steaks.
- Celebrated for its Ahi Tuna Tacos, humble traditional Southern cuisine and what's described as the best Painkiller rum cocktail around, **Front Street Grill at Stillwater** overlooks the Beaufort waterfront in a renovated historic Topsail marine boathouse.

Wilmington

Prized for what many consider to be some of the top beaches in the state, the historic destination of Wilmington is the gateway to the Cape Fear Coast and features a Riverwalk festooned with restaurants. Two standouts include:

- Hotel Ballast, Tapestry Collection by Hilton, is a waterfront property that features **Board & Barrel Coastal Kitchen**, serving up barrel-aged cocktails and Southern small plates from inside or on its outdoor patio. The restaurant also offers a Riverfront Terrace that can accommodate up to 400 for cocktail receptions and seated dinners overlooking the Cape Fear River.
- **Courtyard by Marriott Carolina Beach Oceanfront** sits right on the ocean with a patio area that is connected to Wilmington's new boardwalk, and also offers "picnic" areas on the boardwalk for a more informal experience.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Myrtle Beach

Perhaps the most popular tourism destination in all of the Carolinas, Myrtle Beach draws visitors for its wide beach, family friendly atmosphere, many hotels and attractions (including a boardwalk and promenade), and golf courses and resorts.

Being such a vacation beacon, Myrtle Beach is filled with dining and entertainment venues that are tailor-made for turnkey group events. Following are three standouts:

- **LuLu's at Barefoot Landing**, owned by musician Jimmy Buffet's sister Lucy, is a

guaranteed crowd-pleaser with its laid-back vibe, complete with a large beach area, 20,000-square-foot restaurant and even a ropes course.

- **RipTydz** is a 17,000-square-foot, 500-seat oceanfront rooftop bar and grill located along the Myrtle Beach Boardwalk, with a menu that features fresh seafood (including seafood towers), steaks, tacos and a wide array of specialty cocktails.
- **Wicked Tuna Murrells Inlet** describes itself as a "hook-to-plate restaurant providing a unique seafood experience." A variety of private and semi-private event spaces with indoor and outdoor access are available, allowing for views of Murrells Inlet and the dock where the



MYRTLE BEACH AREA DVB
LULU'S AT BAREFOOT LANDING, MYRTLE BEACH, S.C.

restaurant's seafood is actually unloaded on its way to diners' plates.

Charleston

With an elegance and history that places it among such iconic Southern cities as New Orleans and Savannah, Georgia, Charleston is like a living museum piece.

Two standout Charleston-area restaurants in terms of their cuisine offering include:

- Located in Mt. Pleasant, just northeast of Charleston proper, **Tavern & Table** is reminiscent of the neighborhood taverns of yore. Set on Shem Creek and helmed by Executive Chef Ray England, this venue's draw is classic cocktails and hand-crafted Lowcountry food that utilizes local vendors, fisherpersons and farmers. The tavern can seat up to 32 people for private dining in its T&T Room.
- **Gabrielle at Hotel Bennett** prides itself on stylish traditional Southern cuisine and boasts an outdoor dining terrace overlooking Charleston's historic Marion Square. Led by Executive Chef Bob Gibson, Gabrielle also offers a buzzing indoor bar.



EXPLORE CHARLESTON
GABRIELLE AT HOTEL BENNETT, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Hilton Head Island


At the southern end of the South Carolina coast, Hilton Head Island is a golfer's paradise with a resort feel.

While the island's six AAA Four Diamond resorts offer all the amenities a group would need, one intriguing option is located just west of Hilton Head at Page Island, a chain of nine private hammock islands.

Operated by Destinations DMC, a division of Outside Brands, activities include kayaking and challenge courses.

"Once you get over you feel like you've arrived on the set of the *Survivor* shows—you're keyed into nature" said Carol Kavanaugh-Arrington, vice president of Destinations DMC.

Groups often boat to the island, depart for teambuilding on the neighboring islands, and then arrive back to a main island transformed for an event. The cuisine star is typically a Low Country Boil, consisting of shrimp, kielbasa, potatoes and corn with a signature blend of seasonings.

"Bluffton Oyster Company is our preferred caterer, and also has their own boats, so often times we meet the shrimp boat coming in," Kavanaugh-Arrington said. "So that's how fresh the seafood coming to the island is, the same with oysters." 



OUTSIDE BRANDS
OYSTER ROAST, PAGE ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

A TOAST to the COASTS

Coastal Carolinas F&B experts weigh in on why the region's cuisine is so special

BY TRACY STUCKRATH

Ask anyone in the know about the traditional cuisine of the Coastal Carolinas and odds are they're going to say that its seafood and produce are two defining factors.

The plethora of inlets, streams, ponds, rivers and, of course, the Atlantic Ocean, have provided residents of the quaint and flourishing coastal towns of South and North Carolina livelihoods that are rich in seafood and agriculture.

Carolina Cuisine Experts Weigh In

What I learned by talking to culinary experts in both states is that while they share the Atlantic, the cuisine varies as you travel up the coast from Hilton Head Island and Charleston to Wilmington, New Bern and the Outer Banks.

The one thing that didn't vary is the pride with which they speak about the farmers and fisherpersons whose labor and love are put into farming, fishing, crabbing, shrimping and oystering to provide sources of food and income for their communities.

Hence their adamant that when visiting the coast, you should source local. Ask the restaurants and caterers if their seafood and produce are local, and follow up with, "When and where was it harvested?"

"There are places along the Eastern seaboard that are great places to dine, but I will tell you that there are very few that truly embody that coastal local concept," said Keith Rhodes, James Beard Foundation finalist for Best Southeast Chef and owner of Catch in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Sourcing locally is also key to preserving the culture and livelihood of residents.

"Food is part of the culture here," said Karen Anspacher, director of the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center, who grew up on Harkers Island,

near Beaufort, North Carolina. "When you buy local, you're supporting local families, communities and economies."

In Charleston, South Carolina, Tanya Gurrieri, owner of Salthouse Catering and a native Charlestonian, is always proud to share her support for fellow Coastal Carolinians.

"When we know where something's coming from on our menu, we're going to tell you, because we want you to see that we're supporting local farmers and offering heirloom ingredients—things that have some meaning, you know—not just food," she said.

What You'll be Eating on the Coast

In the Low Country of South Carolina, the first ingredient that comes to mind for Gurrieri is rice—Carolina Gold rice, that is.

A long-grain rice, Carolina Gold—once the most popular rice grown in America and thought to have arrived in Charleston in 1685 from Madagascar—is central to the traditional cuisine of the southern Atlantic coast.

Dishes from the region include Frogmore stew (named for a fishing community on St. Helena Island—so no frogs!), shrimp and grits, crab cakes and oyster pie. For grits, some chefs instead use rice, cooking it low and slow to achieve the same texture.

"Grits really mean a lot to us," said Rhodes, who grew up in the area eating fish and grits. "It is a dish that resonates not just in Southern culture or Black culture or white culture. Everybody who lives down here, who has old ties to this area, that kind of eating definitely resonates."

Barbecue is another one of those things that, when done right, gives proper representation of the area.

"Eastern North Carolina barbecue is in a class of its own, especially with the right preparation—cooked on wood with a thin, vinegar-based barbecue sauce, red peppers and spices," Rhodes said.

Ashley Moser, chef and owner of New Bern's Cypress Hall restaurant, incorporates the fresh vegetables and produce he grew up eating—collards, cabbage, radishes, okra and tomatoes—into all of




SALTHOUSE CATERING, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

his dishes. The Mema's Famous Strawberry Cake on his menu is actually his grandmother's recipe of more than 50 years, and one he and only one of his cousins had to sign non-disclosure agreement to get!

In Duck, North Carolina, on the Outer Banks, Executive Chef Sam McGann said the seasons truly dictate what is on the menu at The Blue Point Restaurant, which he co-owns. In the winter months, oysters, striped bass, dogfish, flounder and clams are on the menu. In May and June, and for six weeks only, are soft-shelled crabs—a must have.

In the summer you can get hard crabs, tuna, amberjack, grouper and snapper. Spot, white perch, croaker, mullet and mackerel fish are all fall fish.

Besides the ingredients, the flavors and cooking styles that really shaped the indigenous food of the coastal regions of the Carolinas were carried to the modern day via its indigenous people, who have been eating some of the same foods for hundreds of years, and the enslaved from the Caribbean, West Indies, and the coasts of Africa.

So, when coming to the coasts of the Carolinas, make sure to request local, learn about the food culture, and know that, as chef and restaurateur Vivian Howard imparts on her Lenoir website (<https://dineatlenoir.com>), food with a story tastes better, and ours is of the rural, agricultural South. 



Tracy Stuckrath lives on the North Carolina coast and is a leading meetings F&B expert who owns thrive! meetings & events. She recently launched the Eating at a Meeting podcast and the new Every Meal Matters online course.

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