

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

The residents of Charleston tend to avoid downtown's touristy old City Market for the same reasons New Yorkers bypass Times Square and New Orleanians skip Bourbon Street. But with the opening of **MERCATO**, a bustling bi-level *ristorante*, locals have a reason to brave the crowds. The ground floor features a long bar and caters to late-night diners with a menu of excellent house-made charcuterie and thin-crust pizzas. The upstairs dining room, lined with red banquettes and huge mirrors, highlights the simple, unpretentious cooking of chef Jacques Larson. His best dishes are of the comfort food variety, including osso buco and, in a delicious marriage of Italian technique and Low Country ingredients, ravioli filled with collard greens and pork. (102 North Market Street; 843-722-6393)

Local favorite **AL DI LA** just gets better with age. Chef-owner John Marshall's latest addition to this West Ashley institution is the sleekly designed *bacaro*, a small-plates and wine-bar extension off the main dining area. Almost every dish pulled from the wood-burning oven delivers, like Marshall's perfectly blistered pizza topped with crème fraîche and pancetta. The menu changes seasonally, but recent highlights were *tonnarelli* (long round noodles) served in a creamy, egg-yolk-based sauce with house-made sausage and pancetta, and fettuccine Bolognese. With dishes like these (and an extensive, well-priced wine list to boot), it's no wonder that Al Di La is no longer a secret. (25 Magnolia Road; 843-571-2321)

Picking up where a talented chef left off is no easy task. But 28-year-old Sean Brock, who took over **MCCRADY'S** from the acclaimed Michael Kramer, is up to the challenge. Brock is a proponent of local produce and *sous-vide*, a French cooking method that involves poaching ingredients in vacuum-sealed bags at super-low temperatures. A pork belly and slow-cooked egg appetizer served in a shallow bowl with tomato confit, chanterelle mushrooms, and bacon consommé showcases Brock's love of both ingredients and technique. Seared foie gras is paired with mini rectangles of roasted sweet potato that bring a slightly southern twist to the dish. The rustic, somewhat plain decor of the restaurant doesn't exactly suit Brock's cutting-edge cooking, but you came for the food, right? (2 Unity Alley; 843-577-0025; mccradysrestaurant.com)