

# A Conversation with Charlestonian Holly Herrick | Okra

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by [Stephanie Burt](#)

Holly Herrick knows good food. As a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, restaurant reviewer and cookbook author, Herrick has spent a lot of time thinking about food, researching food and eating all over the world. Still, after more than a decade as a food writer, a full fork of deliciousness can make her swoon.

Take for instance her reaction to the Lowcountry staple of shrimp and grits (a dish she has tasted countless times), as served by the Old Village Post House in Mount Pleasant, S.C.: "It is one of the best versions I've had. They use a cured sausage that adds a real gutsy earthiness to the familiar dish."

Her effusive enthusiasm for good food and honest preparations is woven through her newest book, *The Charleston Chef's Table*, which celebrates Charleston's current culinary landscape. *OKRA* had a chance to sit down and talk with her about the book and great city she calls home, of course as seen through the lens of some great recipes and restaurants.



Photo credit: Christopher Brown

## **What was the biggest challenge with this book?**

I was really surprised, although having worked with chefs for so long, how hard it was to coordinate the recipes and time with many of these chefs. So many chefs here really bring their energy to the community, and the extent of this giving sometimes made coordinating hard.

We have an amazing pool of talent in this town, varied ethnicities, styles, and there is a brotherhood of chefs unlike any place else I have ever been.

## **How did you deal with the inevitable constant shifting in the restaurant scene?**

I was very cognizant of the lead time for this book, and in 2008, I felt like the bottom was coming out of the world with the economy. But I chose to focus on restaurants that really excel. Since I have been in the newspaper business, I wanted this book to be timely, but Charleston was lucky and there really hasn't been that much movement. And, of course, I will have a chance to revise. This will be an ongoing series with revisions.

## **Why is Charleston such a hot spot for culinary creativity?**

Well, Charleston has been dynamic from the beginning in terms of food. The wealth here, the fact that it was a port and the religious tolerance attracted diverse and broad groups of people. This was a melting pot that set the stage early, but after [Hurricane] Hugo came the first big wave of the current scene. Then there is the trickle down effect of places like Johnson & Wales and now the Art Institute, and the resort effect building

upon itself.

There seems to be no tolerance for mediocrity, and with the energy and beauty here, it is a series of intangibles that add up to gustatory greatness!

**In writing the Charleston Chef's Table, were you thinking more about documenting these restaurants and their recipes or more about the home kitchen?**

Even though I know this book is a mini-era of where Charleston is right now, I was thinking less like a historian and more like a restaurant critic. My job is to tell people where the really good food is, and these recipes are some of my favorites. I did keep the home cook in mind as well as different levels of difficulty in the recipes.

**How do you define the food scene in Charleston at the moment?**

All of a sudden, the chefs seemed to be marching to their own drums, but there are themes here that reflect what's going on elsewhere as well. For instance, many of the chefs here are part of the grassroots focus to use local ingredients and make the product shine.

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The cookbook author has been hard at work in her French-inspired kitchen, with, as usual, delicious results. Herrick's next book is *Tart Love - Sassy, Savory, Sweet and Southern* (Gibbs-Smith), slated to hit bookshelves in Fall 2011.

[The Charleston Chef's Table: Extraordinary Recipes From the Heart of the Old South](#)

Author: Holly Herrick

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About Stephanie Burt:

[Stephanie Burt](#) grew up in the Carolina piedmont at a Southern table where the only spices were salt and pepper, but there were plenty of biscuits, chicken gravy and good green beans to go around. She received both her BA and MA in English from UNC Charlotte and was a former instructor of English and American Studies there as well.

Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Our State: Down Home in North Carolina*, *Lowcountry Living*, *The Hollins Critic*, and the *Greensboro News & Record*, and she is the author of three books: *Ghost Stories of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County: Remnants of the Past in a New South* (Bandit Books, 2003), *Wicked Charlotte* (History Press, 2006), and *Haunted Hills: Ghost Stories of Highlands and Cashiers NC*. She lives with her husband and two dogs in Charleston.