

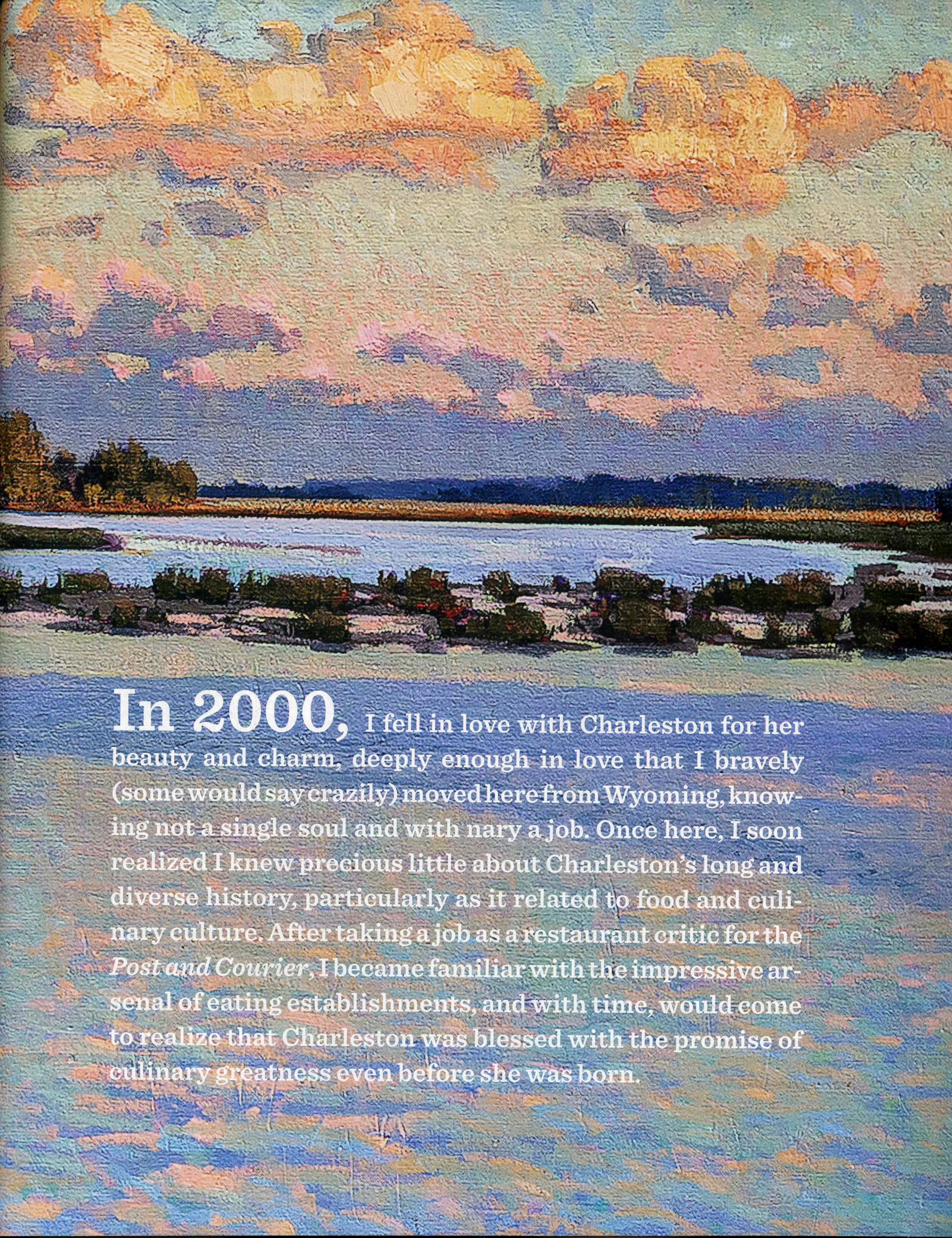
Painting by West Fraser

# Receipts Remembered

*A Brief History of  
Culinary Charleston*

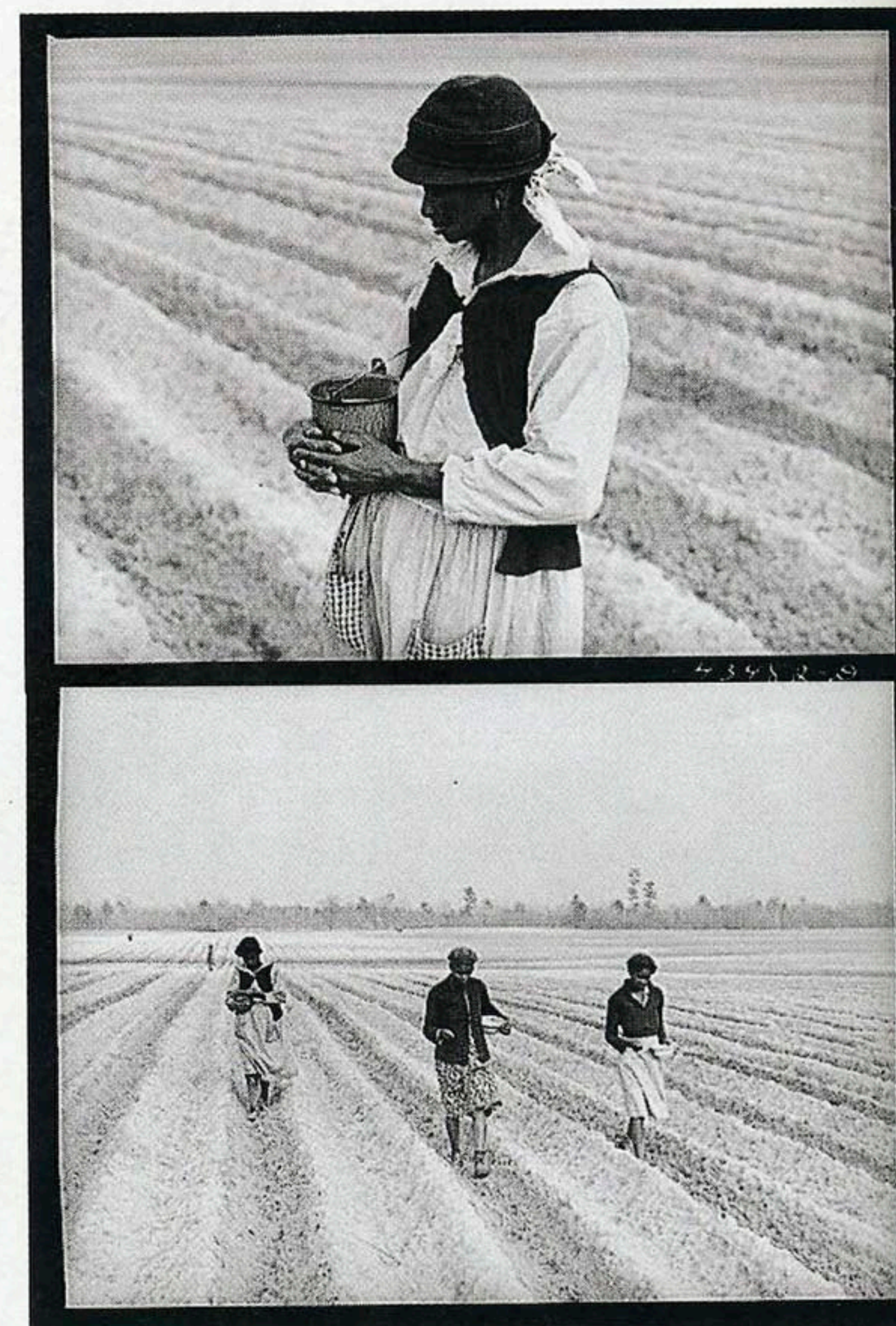
By Holly Herrick





**In 2000,** I fell in love with Charleston for her beauty and charm, deeply enough in love that I bravely (some would say crazily) moved here from Wyoming, knowing not a single soul and with nary a job. Once here, I soon realized I knew precious little about Charleston's long and diverse history, particularly as it related to food and culinary culture. After taking a job as a restaurant critic for the *Post and Courier*, I became familiar with the impressive arsenal of eating establishments, and with time, would come to realize that Charleston was blessed with the promise of culinary greatness even before she was born.



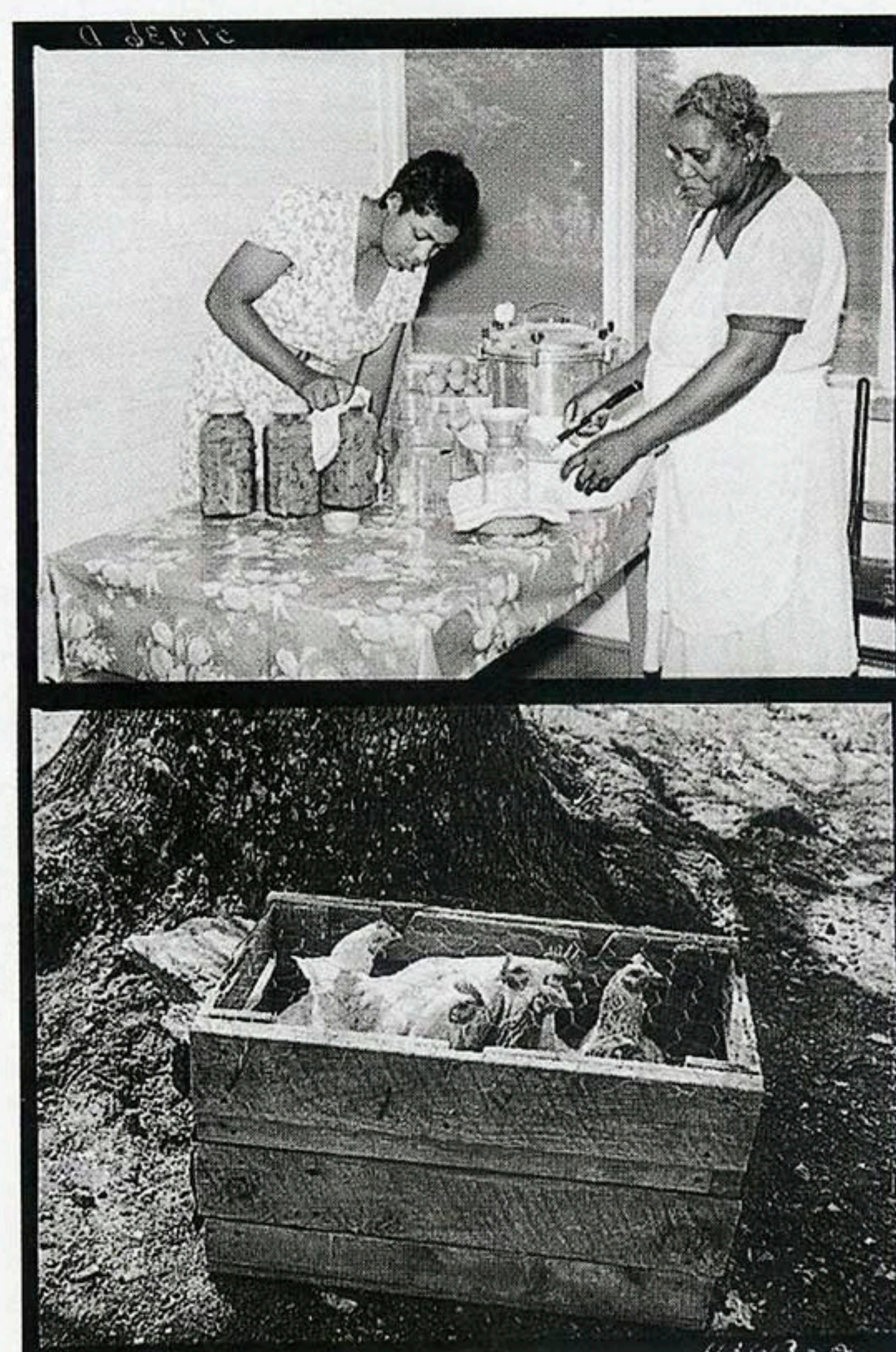


CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
TOTING RICE ON THE DOCK, CHARLESTON SC;  
WOMEN PLANTING CORN ON A PLANTATION NEAR  
MONCK'S CORNER, SC; WIFE AND DAUGHTER OF  
FREDERICK OLIVER CANNING FOOD WITH THE AID  
OF A NEW PRESSURE COOKER. SUMMERTON, SC;  
CHICKEN "COUP." PACOLET, SC.  
OPPOSITE: HOEING RICE, CHARLESTON, SC.  
PHOTO: SUPPLIED

## Looking Back

Charleston, in its gestational phase before it was founded in 1670, and later as fate and events would mandate, was all but destined for culinary greatness. If England's party-hearty King Charles II, who envisioned a wealthy port and playground for landed gentry and country squires, could be considered Charleston's "father," then the Charleston colonial baby was guaranteed good odds of a silver spoon being planted firmly in its rapidly growing proprietorship mouth. Charleston's environment was (and still is) swaddled with rivers, marshes, streams, and the Atlantic Ocean, teeming not just with seafood, but with tides to bathe the rice that would eventually make Charleston very rich. Also, the long Lowcountry growing season that takes a brief two-month winter sabbatical ensures a bounty of fruits and vegetables virtually all year.

Culturally, Charleston's religious tolerance and



general broad appeal would attract a diverse group of immigrants including French Huguenots; Scottish, French, and Irish Protestants; English Anglicans; Jews; Quakers; Methodists; and, eventually, African slaves. Each of these cultural groups transported their own culinary ingredients that would fortify Charleston's unique recipe box. For example, the French would bring us the sophisticated soufflés, tasty tortes, and savory pâtés. The English were responsible most notably for tea, syllabub, and various curry dishes. Africans imported a huge larder of unique ingredients from benne seeds (African for sesame seeds) that are main ingredient in Charleston's celebrated benne seed wafers to stewed okra, field peas, sweet potato pie, and all things rice.

Many early Charlestonians became merchant traders of rice, indigo, and slaves as a means of building wealth. The fortuitous positioning of Charleston's vast port location on the trade paths between England, Barbados, and back, would build vast fortunes that by the



early eighteenth century would make “....Charleston, the fourth largest, most beautiful and wealthiest city in North America” (From A Short History of Charleston by Robert Rosen).

## Slavery and Rice

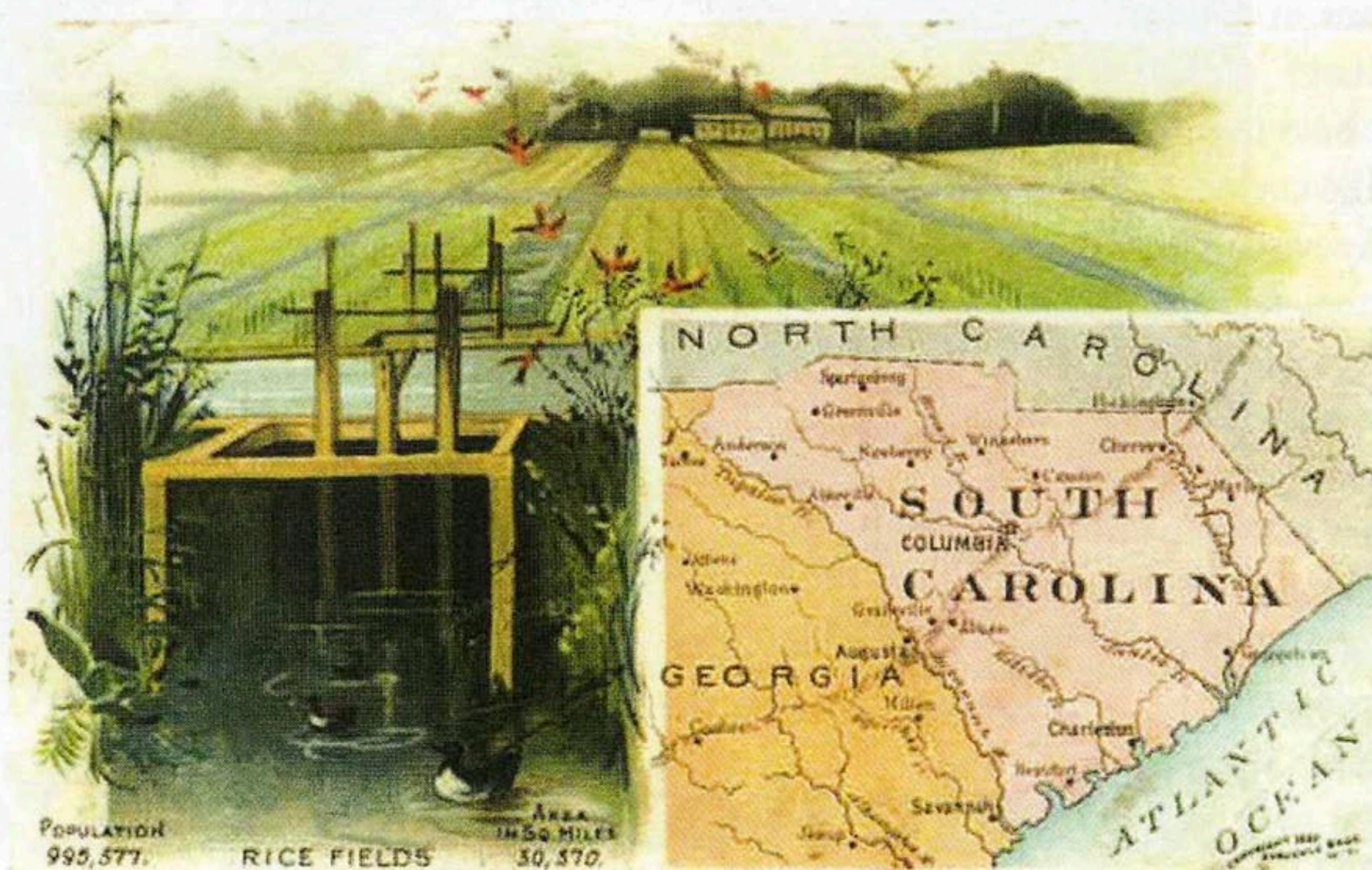
In Charleston, rich merchants eventually became rich plantation owners, and the fuel for the money pit was slaves. Tragically, more slaves passed through the port of Charleston than any other American colony. Most were transported from the rice-producing region of Sierra Leone in Africa where rice had been planted, tended, harvested, and consumed for centuries. Charleston's tidal marshes and climate were ideally suited to rice production. But it was the skills of the slaves that produced successful harvests.

Unlike in other American colonies, many of Charleston's slaves were encouraged to work in a task system where they tended their own private gardens and did their own cooking when the long workdays were done. This tradition, plus slaves' resistance to malaria, meant that they were largely left alone with their work and culinary traditions when their masters left during the warm months when mosquitoes plagued with malaria swarmed the outlying plantations. This ensured that African food dishes such as pilaus and gumbos as well as their Gullah and Geechee languages would endure then as they do today.

Food historian, cookbook author, and former long-standing Charleston resident John Martin Taylor explains how rice, food, and slavery are inextricably combined in Charleston and have been since the beginning. “Obviously, the rice culture, not just the ingredient, was huge in Charleston. It affected our language, our cooking, our arts, our idioms, our folktales, and how we think about ourselves, whether we are black or white.

“Much of West African rice coast culture, even things that were originally from the New World such as peanuts, sweet potatoes, and hot peppers came to us via the slave trade. The stewpot cooking of Africa was more of an influence than any ingredient (such as okra). Think of dishes such as the gumbos, pilaus, and fish stews that went on to become the defining dishes of the entire South with little bits of meat strewn in and

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compare them to the big roasts of meat that were standard fare in England and France,” says Taylor. “I don't like to think of slavery as having contributed anything positive, but I'm willing to say that the slave trade brought us the rice kitchen and spices from afar since the slave trade routes were the same as the spice routes.”

## Wealth, Geography, Port and Food

“The Charleston planters loved to eat—or, rather to dine. Their food came from the rivers, the ocean, and the plantation. They dined on fish, venison, oysters, and shrimp; on ‘plumb marinade,’ ‘mince pyes,’ ‘oyster soop,’ ‘rich plumb cake iced,’ ‘syllabubs,’ ‘white custards in glasses,’ tarts and cheese cakes; as well as on terrapin soup, okra soup, rice soup, and a variety of breads. They imported wine from all over the world, but especially liked Port and Madeira. And they drank a lot of punch made with lemon and limes, which were considered rather exotic since they had to be imported.

Dinner was at three o'clock in the afternoon, an 18th century tradition that complied with the plantation day and the hot weather. The other important meal was break-



OLD MARKET ON THE  
CORNER OF MEETING  
AND MARKET STREET,  
CHARLESTON SC.  
PHOTO: SUPPLIED



fast—with plenty of grits....” (From *A Short History of Charleston* by Robert Rosen)

“Charleston’s wealth contributed to everything about the city; what they ate, the houses they built, their travels and studies, the silversmiths and the cabinetmakers they supported, and the plants in their gardens. They corresponded with and exchanged seeds, plants, and garden designs with some of the world’s greatest botanists and gardeners. They had the port bringing in tropical goods from the Caribbean as well as spices from Asia on a daily basis. By 1750, you could buy anything in Charleston. Add to this the bounty of the subtropics and the waterways,” says Taylor. And you can see Charleston’s culinary elements all coming together.

## Charleston— Then, In-Between, and Now

After the Civil War ended in 1865, so too did slavery and the thrust of the economy that had sustained almost obscene amounts of wealth during the preceding 100 plus years. Fires, earthquakes, relative poverty, and other misfortunes would chip away at Charleston’s luster, but certainly not her pride or her culinary heart and sophistication.

By the mid-twentieth century, meals formerly cooked by “the help” were increasingly being cooked by the ladies of Charleston from family recipes handed down over many decades such as she crab soup and rice rings. With the exception of a few special occasion restaurants, such as Henry’s or Perdita’s, meals were eaten mainly at home with friends and family. Long-time resident and author Barbara Hagerty described Charleston between World War II and the late seventies to me as “backwater” or “provincial.”

Charleston native, cookbook author, and food editor Ann Mitchell Thrash describes the “old” days this way: “When I was a child in the 1960s and ’70s, going out to eat was really a special occasion thing. There wasn’t any shrimp and grits on restaurant menus, as far as I can recall. But there was shrimp and grits at home, and it was such a simple thing—just a little gravy made with bacon drippings and a bit of butter thickened with flour, and the sweet shrimp tossed in to cook just for a heartbeat until they were tender.”

Then, along came Spoleto in 1977, Mayor Joe Riley’s restoration and rejuvenation efforts, Charleston Place, and Johnson & Wales culinary school, all

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eventually attracting tourism, money, and increased demand for more and better restaurants. In the wake of another perfectly horrific storm, Hurricane Hugo steamrolled the city in 1989, bringing in relief money and attention from all over the world. Charleston was on the map again. Maverick chefs like Magnolia’s Donald Barickman and Slightly North of Broad’s Frank Lee seized the reins on a new and higher bar for the Charleston dining scene.

Today, Charleston’s chefs are increasingly going back to those old heirloom seeds and culinary traditions forged in Charleston’s much younger days. It’s exciting to see Husk’s Sean Brock put old-world Southern spin on cornbread and heirloom pigs and produce grown, harvested, and (in some cases) preserved on his farm. Or to watch Circa 1886’s chef, Marc Collins, re-energize nineteenth-century recipes with a modern spin and locally sourced products. Makes any good foodie worth his or her salt hungry for what Charleston’s food future holds.