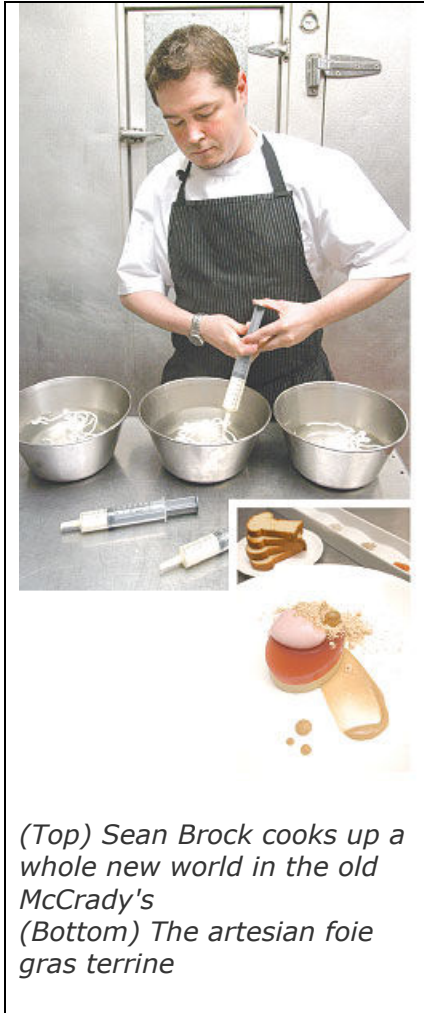


The New Sheriff in Town

Sean Brock returns — and takes no prisoners

BY JEFF ALLEN
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*(Top) Sean Brock cooks up a whole new world in the old McCrady's
(Bottom) The artesian foie gras terrine*

McCrady's

American/Eclectic - Upscale
Entrées: \$20 and up
2 Unity Alley
Downtown
577-0025

You couldn't pick a better place to shake the foundations of the Charleston culinary scene. A venerable old bar, steeped in the pedigree and lore of the historic quarter, perennial bridesmaid to the more celebrated establishments in town; a brash young chef, originally trained in local kitchens, blazing back into town with strange, foreign ideas about food. Wake up, Charlestonians, the new style just hit the street — and it sure is tasty.

McCrady's always possessed the right stuff to be a major destination restaurant. It sits smack dab in the middle of a great restaurant city, enjoys generous financial support, and exhibits striking architecture — all the ingredients are in the bowl, but the mixture has never coalesced. The place traditionally offered excellent food, but was not especially creative. It earned a reputation for staid dinners, fancy meat and potatoes with big red wines. Enter Sean Brock and staff. As if headlining the glorious return of The Hermitage Hotel in Nashville were not enough, he now focuses his ambitions on a much larger prize, the wholesale redefinition of cuisine in the Holy City. McCrady's is now ground zero for the next wave of new, innovative food in South Carolina.

This is not to suggest that Brock is the only guy or gal in town toying with new ideas, but he's the only chef doing it in a 228-year-old tavern that once held a dinner party for George Washington. That clearly represents a watershed event. If his food were architecture, the papers would already be filled with vehement diatribes decrying this slander of our precious

"heritage" of grits and gravies. His method does not emphasize a new twist on the traditional outlay of Charleston's cuisine. It breaks new, revolutionary ground only beginning to be explored in this city.

The dining space Brock inherits suitably frames his creations; dark wood and brick in the dining room provide an impressive environ, playful modern details interplay with the old, providing a perfect foil for the kitchen. It is this juxtaposition of McCrady's classic styling with the postmodernism of Brock's cuisine that enhances the aesthetic of his genius. This transformation took a few months to complete, but the last vestiges of the old McCrady's have left the kitchen for good.

Gone are elaborate descriptions of preparations. We are left only with lists of ingredients, the prose merely hinting at the possibilities with which they may be combined or how they might come prepared. Dishes, such as the "Painted Hills Beef Tenderloin" (\$34) are tersely enumerated: "Trice cooked potatoes, Trumpet Royales, Cipollini, Arugula." You are left to wonder, "Is the beef grilled, poached, encrusted, stuffed?" To eat at the new McCrady's requires trust, a certain submission to the chef's talent — and he delivers a remarkable experience.

First courses in the spring menu showcase another signature of this kitchen, a willingness to explore the culinary landscape with exotic ingredients and methods of preparation.

Dishes like the "Wagyu Beef Shortribs" (\$14) surprise the eyes. Not looking like ribs at all (the bones are gone), they, like many of the offerings, have been transformed through a unique slow cooking process (technically, vacuum sealed in plastic bags and poached at a constant temperature for quite some time). They come paired with pools of smoked celeriac and an onion-mustard relish that would be good all by itself.

"Butter Poached Maine Lobster" (\$15) sounds innocuous, but one bite swirls the tongue in a tropical medley that must be tasted to really be appreciated. Flavors layer themselves effortlessly into a brilliant tapestry, owing to the exotic tonka beans that lend their fragrance to the dish. The "Artesian Foie Gras Terrine" is the antithesis of the customary heavy goose/duck liver experience. It sits delicately upon the plate, tempered by the acidic twang of a wonderfully concentrated grape aspic and the rich, textural crunch of peanuts — delivering a surreal application of a familiar luxury food.

Salads and soups marry seamlessly into the progression. A large ball of entwined greens and shaved fennel floats like a green globe in the "Salad of Arugula, Fennel, and Baby Beets (\$12)." Small domes of blood-red beet perch on pillowy clouds of fresh cheese like an edible Kremlin, perfectly balancing the pungent bite of the arugula with an earthy base. "White Asparagus from the Loire Valley" (\$12) comes saddled with meltingly tender petals of tomato confit and a marvelously prepared egg, so slowly and consistently cooked that the entire thing quivers throughout with the same gelatinous texture. Soft blades of Parmesan provide a rich foil, marrying the trifecta.

Main courses follow with tenderloin, salmon, grouper, and pork preparations, each peppered with seasonal or downright lavish extravagances — wild ramps, truffles, sumac, and fiddlehead ferns — rare and delicious morsels probably not on the dinner tables of most Charlestonians. A "Pan Roasted Moulard Duck (\$34)," one of the rare instances where you can discern how the dish will be prepared, must come from one serious animal. It seems to be one breast, of profound size (even for a moulard), thinly sliced and accompanied with an incredibly creative "Chocolate-Balsamic Jus." The fatty layer of duck skin is perfectly crisp, a textural shell covering the rich meat of the fowl and a testament to Brock's level of skill and execution. "Seared Hawaiian Tuna (\$27)," about a pound of it, constitutes a piece of postmodern art. Perfectly rare cylinders of fish sit atop a neon green, pungent puree of potatoes and wild ramps, bathed with an ethereal sheen of black truffle foam. A sweet syrup reduction bisects the fish towers, flowing through the shadow of a large, crunchy wing that Brock somehow derives from black truffles. Stacks of asparagus and sautéed maittake mushrooms guard the corners of the dish. It is Spoleto on the plate, an edible poster of what serious food has become.

If McCrady's has any weakness, it comes from the renewed popularity that Brock generates. The space is large, and during packed, weekend nights the strain on both the kitchen and the wait staff becomes evident. Dishes sometimes arrive unevenly and execution falters. Some of this surely can be attributed to the difficulty of integrating Brock's intricate style, but it is this approach to food that could, with practice, garner McCrady's, and Charleston, more widespread attention. Perhaps the best meals can be found on off-nights, when the staff can bring their full game to the table; limiting weekend seating, even to the detriment of price, would be a welcome idea. Regardless, the real question is whether Brock can continue to grow as a chef, moving technique beyond the realm of known method, inventing new applications of culinary skill. He represents a new generation of chefs, pushing forward with brash food and no apologies, kicking ass and taking names. Sean Brock will surely propel Charleston's culinary scene in profoundly new directions. It should be one hell of a ride.