

39 Rue de Jean / Coast / Poe's Tavern (Charleston)

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The Humble Gourmand

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Charleston, S.C., is a city with grand architecture, charming garden nooks off quiet cobblestone streets, all topped off with a moss-covered oak-tree Southern drawl. And, might I say, it could just be *the* foodie destination between New York City and New Orleans.

A few things are a must in this city, and its proximity to the Atlantic puts seafood at the top of that list. Head to Coast in downtown Charleston, where things are a bit more upscale but still casually cool, with some of the best, classically prepared fresh seafood around. Try to get a table outside in the alley, where palm trees and strung white lights — and a glass of red — made us feel much more comfortable. Inside, though, has a different vibe. A funky horseshoe bar with a separate, long, bar-like seating area has a view of the open kitchen. It would be great for a date. There's also a patio, and a dining room with ocean-themed tables.

The menu spans ceviche, a killer raw bar, and tons of appetizers and soups. A diner has a hard time with decisions here, for sure.

I say start with oysters from the raw bar. The selection changes to what's freshest that day, and it's fresh you can count on. Briny, salty, and served with a squirt of lemon, they get the dinner started off just right.

Seafood is offered grilled, fried, baked, poached... hard to narrow down, but try the "Charleston classic" crab-stuffed tilapia. Served with sweet onion jam, Parmesan mashed potatoes and haricots verts, all topped with a lemon white wine butter sauce, it's a recipe for a pleasant seafood coma.

Right next door to its sister Coast is 39 Rue de Jean, where the fare is French-bistro-meets-Japanese-influence. Gorgeous brick walls and menus painted on mirrors throughout gives it a true French bistro feel, save for the soaring ceilings and large open space, which remind the diner she's still in America.

Try the sushi — maguro and hamachi — as it's flavorful and fresh. The beef tartare, aged and prepared traditionally, with toast points, was delicious (though a fondness for capers is a prerequisite).. The *moules* (mussels) are exceptionally succulent sea creatures, but the missing crisp frites were a notable downfall of the dish. *Moules* are available in six varieties — Provencal, pistou, curry, etc. — but the aioli offering was arguably the simplest and most flavorful.

While it was an appetizer-only evening, my hosts assured me that the rest of Rue de Jean's menu did not disappoint. It has all the classics — foie gras, escargots, steak frites, Pissadlaiserre. It will certainly be a stop on my next visit. Charleston is a lovely city with a booming dining scene,

beckoning foodies and eaters of all types to be enveloped in its charms. As this reviewer's sister resides there, I'll conclude by saying ... to be continued!