

Lowcountry Bliss

WHEN ONE OF THE SOUTH'S TOP CHEFS GETS MARRIED, THE DETAILS ARE DELICIOUS.

Shrimptoats chug past on the Cooper River to the tune of calypso music. A roasted pig sizzles. Jumbo shrimp chill. All the while, seagulls glide overhead, expressing their glee at the spread below. A proud pelican, though, is the only seafaring bird boss enough to invite himself to one of the most memorable wedding-rehearsal feasts ever to hit Charleston, South Carolina.

"What'll it be? Red or white wine?" a bartender jokingly asks the winged guest. The invited ones laugh. "This will be interesting," he says, smiling.

No doubt. Acclaimed Charleston chef Robert Carter—"Bob" as he's often called—is getting married. So that means that those gathered at Mount Pleasant's historic Alhambra Hall on this warm June afternoon can expect two things: amazing food and setting, just like at downtown's plush Peninsula Grill in the Planters Inn, where Bob is executive chef. Most guests at the casual waterside event say "wow" when they see what's in store. It appears the food caterer, Mr. B's Bar-B-Q of Mount Pleasant, and the setting's creator, top-notch wedding planner Tally Attaway, have been a bit busy.

As Tally puts the final touches on the rustic-style buffet (see "Down-home Decor" on page 24), the Southern food draws everyone forth, plates in hand. There,

by Denise Gee



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"Our carriage ride is one of my fondest memories," says chef Robert Carter, toasting to the future with his bride, Allyson. "The route we took was through some of the most beautiful streets of Charleston. It was our moment."



Left: The setting for the rehearsal dinner was as beautiful as the food was delicious. **Below:** A guest gazes out at the river. Jumbo shrimp on ice set the stage for the feast.



among heaping-full galvanized-tin tubs and cast-iron skillets, guests find 75 pounds of heads-on jumbo shrimp; pulled pork from a pig cooked for 14 hours; buttery lima beans; sublime macaroni and cheese; succulent smoked chicken; summer-fresh tomato-and-cucumber salad; soft yeast rolls and crumbly cornbread; and the pièce de résistance—creamy grits (cooked for seven hours, mind you) served with a rich tomato gravy. Oh, and some terrific hush puppies too.

“Gotta have the hush puppies,” says Mr. B’s Brantley Beach. “We’re at a traditional Lowcountry pig pickin’.”

While guests fill their plates, Bob looks around for his bride-to-be, Allyson Carter. She’s laughing about the fact that she doesn’t need to decide if she should change her name



DOWN-HOME DECOR

At Bob and Allyson Carter’s rehearsal dinner, doable decorating ideas from top wedding consultant Tally Attaway were as plentiful as the food.

- Use dark terry cloth hand towels as barbecue napkins. Tie each with raffia.
- Opt for colorful bandannas as country-style table accents and chair ties.
- Serve barbecue sauce in mason jars.
- Light pathways with tiki torches for a festive retro touch, and top tables with hurricane lanterns to ensure candles stay lit.
- If mosquitoes might be uninvited guests, provide bowls of individual bug-repellent towelettes.
- For an extra Southern touch, incorporate cotton bolls into table centerpieces.
- Use tucked-under denim and burlap for easy tablecloths.
- Four bricks fashioned in a square with a Sterno holder in the middle make an easy trivet to keep dishes warm.
- Use dark, large dough bowls as attractive serving dishes for saucy meats.

(Carter is her maiden name too). Like Bob, she’s right at home at such fetes; she and Bob met while she worked as a bartender at the Peninsula Grill.

At the evening’s end, a full moon appears as if on cue. The only thing that could top this is dessert, and it does: individual coconut cakes fashioned as chef’s hats by the Peninsula Grill pastry chef Esthi Steffenelli.

“Bob’s done so much planning, I feel like I’m just along for the ride,” Allyson says while sampling a cake.

After the next day’s wedding at historic Bethel United Methodist Church, Bob and Allyson take a horse-drawn carriage ride to the reception, three

blocks away. But first there's the stop that will be as memorable as the moment the two met at the altar.

The carriage pulls in front of the restaurant, where about two dozen staffers, some restaurant guests, and tourists have gathered to toast Bob and Allyson. Cheers and smiles abound for several minutes until the carriage is off once more, this time to Hibernian Hall a few blocks away.

As Bob, dressed to the nines, approaches the entrance to the historic reception hall, one of his friends gibes, "Hey, man, you'd make a helluva doorman at The Pierre hotel."

"Yeah, yeah," Bob laughs.

Inside, Bob's mother, Jeri Ford Carter, is happy about her son's marriage: "They were good friends before they married, and they have a lot in common. If he makes half as good a husband as he has been a son, she'll have a fantastic mate."

Bob asked friend and fellow chef John Zucker of Cru Catering to oversee the reception's food. "As you can

imagine, I was very particular about it," Bob says. "We talked a good bit beforehand, and I told him what I wanted. The food had to have Southern influences, but I knew because I'm a chef, it was going to be anticipated and scrutinized, so it had to be quality. It needed to be freshly prepared and cooked properly. John achieved both fabulously."

A gargantuan table bears more than 30 selections, including smoked salmon on buttermilk-herb pancakes with caviar and candied lime; seared duck breast with Carolina goat cheese and Vidalia onion chowchow; spicy seared shrimp, tasso, and tortellini salad; beef tenderloin with Parmesan-truffle butter; and seared coriander-cured sushi-grade yellowfin tuna.

The happy couple dance, hugging each other tight. Ahead of them lies a food-filled trip to Italy. "It's the true icing on the wedding cake," Bob says. As will be a happy life filled with more food and more laughter. ✨

Below: On the way to the reception site, Bob and Allyson receive a special treat as Peninsula Grill staffers, restaurant guests, and tourists celebrate the couple's union with applause and good wishes.



THE CARTERS' WEDDING SURVIVAL TIPS

"Every girl should be at her own reception," says newlywed Allyson Carter. "Someone told me at the start of our wedding planning, 'Don't commit yourself to doing everything.' I'm really glad I listened to that advice and delegated different duties. With all the rushing around that's needed, it's really not worth overdoing and then not enjoying your own wedding."

Here's even more been-there-done-that advice.

- If possible, have an escape location for either entertaining out-of-town guests or being alone; don't try to use your own home. "My parents needed a place to stay, so they rented a beach house on the Isle of Palms, and every opportunity I had I went there. It was a nice change of pace from the hecticness."
- Start writing thank-you notes from the moment you start receiving gifts. "You've got to just put your head down and get through it," Allyson says.
- "Call and reserve the church, the rehearsal dinner location, and the reception location *immediately*," Bob says. "When we got started, most of the places we wanted were reserved for the next nine months to a year."
- Know your budget. "Don't skimp on everything," Bob says. "If it's more important to have a great party with a wonderful sit-down dinner, then have a more casual reception (to balance the cost)."
- When planning for food, offer something for everyone: "Allyson's father is a vegetarian, as is her matron of honor, so we had to have some options. You want everyone to be happy," Bob advises.