

Fleet Landing: Stuffed hush puppies

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The idea began with Jim Epper, the first chef at Fleet Landing, who wanted to devise a signature item that diners wouldn't be able to find anywhere else. So he took a mainstay of Lowcountry seafood plates and turned it into something wholly different, which has managed to maintain its popularity at the downtown restaurant for nearly two decades.

That would be the stuffed hush puppies, which are filled with a veloute — a savory sauce with French origins — of lobster, rock shrimp, leeks and corn, and placed over a creole tomato sauce. According to Drew Hedlund, director of culinary operations at the 186 Concord St. restaurant, the hush puppies are scooped with a large disher, cooked halfway through, and then placed in a walk-in cooler.

“After they have cooled, we cut and core them so they can be flash-fried before filling them,” Hedlund said. The fully cooked and cored hush puppies are then filled with a veloute of corn and leek, augmented with poached lobster and rock shrimp. The hush puppies are then placed over a roasted creole tomato sauce, and garnished with fried leeks and chopped chives.

The dish puts a different twist on hush puppies, those fried balls of cornmeal that are ubiquitous throughout the South—even if their origins remain rather mysterious. “They’re delicious, they’re iconic, and no one seems to have a clue where they came from,” Post and Courier restaurant critic Robert Moss once wrote on the website Serious Eats. Myths about their creation range from Confederate soldiers feeding yapping dogs balls of dough to keep them quiet, or Cajuns frying up a salamander known as a mud puppy.

Nonsense, Moss writes. In South Carolina, hush puppies can be traced back to something called “red hose bread” once eaten with fried fish. The name we know today, he adds, is likely “a euphemism for stopping the dogs in your stomach from growling.” Which is certainly the case at Fleet Landing, where the stuffed hush puppies remain as popular now as they were when the waterfront restaurant first opened in 2004.

“This item has been on our menu since inception, almost 18 years,” Hedlund said, “and it is our number one appetizer on the menu.”

Building Blocks of Charleston Cuisine is a series that celebrates the connection between the Lowcountry and its vibrant food scene. Each week features a dish, restaurant, or chef that’s played a role in keeping the region’s culinary history alive.