



COOL  
INSIDE

HANK'S SEAFOOD RESTAURANT



For hundreds of years, the seaside city of Charleston, South Carolina, has beguiled the outside world with its understated charms. Colonial and antebellum homes and gardens stand shoulder-to-shoulder on its peninsula; dunes stretch languidly along its beaches; oysters sleep soundly on its marshy tidal flats; and fresh crops bake under the Southern sun that kisses its outlying farmlands.

Of late, Charleston has found renown as top destination for vacationers, and also nabbed accolade after accolade as one of the best eating spots in the country. At the forefront of this culinary revolution is Irishman Frank McMahon, chef at Hank's Seafood Restaurant.

McMahon, who trained at Le Bernardin, The Homestead Inn, and more, helped put Charleston on the map with his work at Restaurant Million, McCrady's, and others before adding his own deft signature to Hank's menu. Inspired by the bounty of fish, crabs, and shellfish delivered fresh to the restaurant each morning, McMahon's "chef specialties" range from tartares to seafood sausage to simply roasted scallops, all paired with locally harvested, lightly prepared vegetables. Served up in a 100-year-old one-time warehouse, his classic, regional, and nouveau dishes draw crowds nightly.

This book, with photographs by Peter Frank Edwards and text by McMahon and Melissa Bigner, celebrates Hank's—its history, its fare, its convivial culture, its staff, and of course, its chef—with 100-plus recipes and scores of stories. So, pull up a chair, turn a page, and dig in.



WORLD FAMOUS



**Hank's**  
*Seafood*  
RESTAURANT

*Written by Frank McMahon and Melissa Bigner*

*Photography by Peter Frank Edwards*

*Foreword by Hank Holliday*

PENINSULA GRILL ASSOCIATES, LLC  
*Charleston, South Carolina*



## FOREWORD

*“The name on the outside may be Hank’s Seafood Restaurant, but anybody who knows the place and our chef knows that it’s really Frank’s Seafood Restaurant.”*

In 1996, I was extremely fortunate to be able to buy a very appealing 100-year-old warehouse in Charleston at the corner of Hayne and Church streets. Within sight of downtown’s City Market, the historic property had served time as a boxing club in the 1920s, was home once to Tezza Tile, and had been the second incarnation of Charleston’s famed Garden & Gun dance club in the 1980s. By the time The Holliday Companies acquired it, it had no roof—thanks to Hurricane Hugo—and it had sprouted a few palmetto trees—inside, that is.

Still, the place had great potential. And by the late 1990s, we knew it was the ideal home for the seafood restaurant that seemed the perfect sequel to our first dining establishment, Peninsula Grill. A dream team of South Carolina and New York luminaries transformed the space into what eventually became Hank’s Seafood Restaurant. To this day, we’re indebted to the designers—Charleston’s extraordinarily talented Amelia T. Handegan and New York’s Bentel & Bentel—and Columbia’s remarkable contractor Mark Hood of Hood Construction for creating a space that resurrected the charming appointments of old Charleston restaurants with all of today’s modern amenities.

And, too, we’re grateful for Sergio Roa, our indispensable company president, who has been a vital component of the Hank’s team since construction began. The story of Hank’s would not be complete without mentioning his role, from project inception through a very difficult renovation process and on into all these years of operations. Sergio has quietly, modestly, and efficiently been the consummate behind-the-scenes problem solver for all of our properties; Hank’s, in particular,

certainly would not be where it is today without his counsel, assistance, encouragement, and competence.

As for the team’s efforts and end result? Leather booths, 15-foot-high ceilings, pine paneling, mahogany accents, tile floors, copper and zinc bar tops, and one of the most efficient and user-friendly kitchens in town—they included them all and nailed it. The end result—inside and out—is an award-winning renovation that blends perfectly into Charleston’s Historic District and the City Market neighborhood. Further, the building is more than shored up for the next century.

As a lifelong student of historic preservation, I am very proud of both the design and renovation, but the real story of Hank’s and its remarkable success revolves around the staff that runs the restaurant, most especially its extraordinary chef, Frank McMahon. Every entrepreneur should have the privilege—and luck—to be associated with the talent, intelligence, work ethic, integrity, and leadership ability of a Frank McMahon. If I could script out my life, one of the things I’d always want it to include is being in business with him. While it was a delight to bring a 100-year-old building back to life with Amelia and Mark, and it was a fascinating process to work with Frank to develop the concept of Hank’s Seafood, the real fun began when I watched Frank take control as chef.

Now, 12 years later, I think we’d both agree that Hank’s has exceeded our wildest expectations. Our company’s motto is “Tweak Daily.” Whether that’s a restaurant, a hotel room, a lobby, or whatever, we want it to be better tomorrow than it was yesterday. And nobody epitomizes our motto better than Frank.

Frank’s not a guy who sits still, and the restaurant reflects that. There



*From left: Sergio Roa, President, The Holliday Companies, left, with Hank Holliday, CEO, in front of Hank’s Seafood Restaurant on Hayne Street*



are so many things that we can hang the success on—400 dinners a night, excellent national and local reviews for more than a decade—all of which hinge on him. Beside his talents and ethics, I think we do well because he's willing to grow and compromise—as evidenced by the fried seafood we offer, which he really didn't want to include on the menu in the beginning. Next, he's an amazing leader. There are something like 11 guys—young guys—in the kitchen who have been there a minimum of 9 years—unheard of in the restaurant business. But they would run through a brick wall for him because he is that kind of a leader. I think it's because—unlike 99 percent of chefs—he's not consumed by ego. All that, and the food—which started out stellar—has gotten better every single year.

Then there's plain Frank; the guy is funny, hilarious, in fact. He's got extraordinary morals; a wonderful wife, Gigi; two incredible children; and a lifetime of experience in the industry (his father and his brother are wonderful chefs), and he's just a remarkable guy. So remarkable that, when I go on my sabbaticals, the one business I don't have to worry about when I'm away is Hank's. I'm fortunate that Frank—and Sergio Roa—have both me and the restaurant covered in every imaginable way.

But even though I knew all this, I'm a little embarrassed to say even I didn't realize the breadth and depth of Frank's talent until The Planters Inn & Peninsula Grill hosted the North American Relais & Châteaux meeting in 2000. Frank hosted and prepared a luncheon at Hank's for 100 of the world's snootiest and most discriminating hoteliers and restaurateurs—and completely blew them away. I was seated between that year's Relais & Châteaux International President, Regis Bulot of Paris, and Robert Gagnon of Quebec's Auberge Hatley, when Frank sent out a poached salmon dish with a lobster reduction. "I want to meet this chef," said Bulot immediately and unequivocally. "And I want your company and Charleston to host the 2001 Relais & Châteaux International Congress of the worldwide Relais & Châteaux membership." Nice endorsement, to say the least.

I write all of this to say to Frank, to the staff at Hank's, and to the patrons who visit us, that the name on the outside may be Hank's Seafood Restaurant, but anybody who knows the place and our chef knows that it's really Frank's Seafood Restaurant.

—Hank Holliday, CEO, The Holliday Companies





## CHEF FRANK MCMAHON

*“Hank’s first night open was February 12, 1999 during the Southeastern Wildlife Expo weekend. We did 400 covers and I felt like I’d been mauled by a silverback gorilla. We still call crazy nights ‘silverback nights.’”*

When I was about 12, my parents bought a B&B and moved us out of the Limerick City, Ireland, before I could turn into a real juvenile delinquent. My old man started a restaurant there called “Thissilldous”—This’ll Do Us. It confused the hell out of people—was it Greek? What? But it ended up in *Bon Appétit* and even Air Force One came by.

As kids, my brother and sisters and I always ended up in the restaurant kitchen because it was the only kitchen in the house. Dad would put the sauces in a cooling area and a lot of weeknights instead of a real dinner, all four of us would dip bread in the different sauces. We loved it!

But that was the fun stuff. Mostly I got a real ass-kicking working for my old man. Every day, get home from rugby practice, I’d get busy skinning sole, chopping parsley, cleaning—whatever needed to be done. I couldn’t do anything right by him, I cut tomatoes wrong, broke up ice too loud—he said I sounded like a sledgehammer. But nonetheless it got in my bones, and all through high school I worked there or in other restaurants.

By the time I moved completely on from the Thissilldous kitchen to other restaurants, I was pressed, clean, and on top of things. My first boss said I looked more like a chef than his chef. That was Joe (aka ‘Uncle Joe’) Shanahan, and eventually

he sent me to work in Greenwich, Connecticut, at the Stamford Yacht Club after I worked for him at the Dunraven Arms Hotel in Limerick. He gave me my first restaurant job in America, and I’m forever grateful to him for it. I met my wife, Gigi, there and eventually went to the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park thanks to Uncle Joe and his nephew, Carl Shanahan.

Before I really switched over to seafood (I got into it when I was working at Le Bernardin with Eric Ripert and Gilbert LeCoze), the kitchens where I’d been—the Stamford Yacht Club and Homestead Inn in Stamford—were more meat-driven. But with seafood I found so many more species to play with—fish, crustaceans, and shellfish—all were more delicate than meat. I learned seafood’s not forgiving; you really have to treat it with respect. And it turned out I liked the process of cooking it, taking a piece of fish, scaling it, breaking it down, sautéing it correctly until it was transformed.

It’s funny, I once took a personality test to see if there might be some other career I was suited for. Air traffic controller was the only alternate match. I’m already doing that here, so I think I’ll stay put. There’s just the right amount of pressure and a solid pace. Plus, I love the creative aspect of cooking like nobody’s business. — Frank McMahon



*Clockwise from top: Frank with his twin sisters, parents, and brother; four-year-old Frank in Limerick City, Ireland; the dining room at Thissilldous; Frank with wife Gigi, daughter Keely, and son Rory*



**CHEF'S  
SPECIALTIES**



## GRITTY ORIGINS

Grits are a staple of Charleston cooking with roots back to its earliest colonial days in the late 1600s. That's because British settlers modeled their gardens—and diets—on those of the Native Americans here. Essentially milled corn kernels, grits are cooked into a porridge-like consistency or leaven cakes. Today, a handful of Southern grist mills continue to stone-grind grits, from Falls Mills in Tennessee to Anson Mills in South Carolina.

Shrimp and grits first appeared in a cookbook in the 1930s-era *Two Hundred Years of Charleston Cooking* as a breakfast dish enjoyed by its author for some 78 years prior. He kept things simple, including only grits, butter, salt, and shrimp. Simplicity is at the heart of the original dish, says cookbook author and Nathalie Dupree, who penned an entire book on the subject. “It started,” she wrote in *Charleston* magazine, “we think, with creek shrimp—so tender and young they could be eaten, head and all, without peeling. What could be easier than starting a pot of grits in salty marsh water, covering it and turning it low, then going out with a seine and scooping up some of the crustaceans while watching the tide rise with the sun? By the time you got back to the house, the grits would be done just enough to cling to the teeth but not so much as to stick between them.” Sauté the shrimp in butter, add minimal seasoning, and hello, breakfast. Or lunch. Or dinner.



## SHRIMP AND GRITS

*“Shrimp and grits were a big deal when we worked out the menu. Nobody really told me how to do it, so I just made this recipe up. Sautéed shrimp, a little heat from the andouille sausage, fresh tomato reduction, and creamy rich grits combine to make this a customer favorite.”*

S E R V E S   E I G H T

2 cups small dice andouille sausage  
2½ lbs large (21/25 count) shrimp, peeled and deveined  
1 Tbs chopped garlic  
5 cups tomato jus (see recipe)  
Kosher salt and ground white pepper  
3 Tbs cold butter  
Grits (see recipe)  
2 tomatoes, seeded and diced  
1 bunch green onions, sliced thin

**GRITS**  
5 cups chicken stock (see p. 211)  
1 cup heavy cream  
¼ lb butter  
1 tsp chopped garlic  
2 cups grits  
Kosher salt and ground white pepper

In a 2-quart heavy-bottomed saucepan, bring chicken stock, heavy cream, butter, garlic, salt and pepper to a boil. Whisk in the grits gradually and reduce heat to low. Cook grits for about 45 minutes, stirring frequently.

Heat a medium saucepan and add the sausage. Let the sausage render for 3 minutes. Add the shrimp and garlic and sauté for one minute. Add the tomato jus. Season with salt and pepper. Simmer for 3 to 5 minutes, stir in the butter and adjust the seasonings, if needed. Serve in 8 large bowls, one scoop of grits per bowl. Place 7 to 10 shrimp around the grits and ladle the sauce in each bowl. Garnish with tomato and green onions.

**TOMATO JUS**  
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil  
1 cup sliced onion  
2 sprigs fresh thyme  
2 sprigs fresh rosemary  
2 cloves garlic, chopped  
½ cup Burgundy red wine  
¾ cup red wine vinegar  
8 cups chopped fresh tomatoes  
Kosher salt and ground white pepper

In a 4-quart saucepan over medium heat, add the extra virgin olive oil, onion, herbs, and garlic, and sweat for 5 minutes. Add the wine, vinegar, and tomatoes, and stew for 1 hour. Remove from heat and purée. Strain through a fine mesh strainer. Season with salt and pepper.

## FISH AND CHIPS

SERVES FOUR

### BATTER

1 cup very cold amber beer  
½ cup all-purpose flour  
½ cup Wondra flour  
½ cup cornstarch  
¼ tsp baking powder

In a bowl, add the wet ingredients to the dry and mix. Keep cold.

### FISH

8 each 4 oz pieces white fish  
Flour, for dusting  
Peanut oil, for deep frying

Deep fry at 365°F.

### Chef's note:

*For superior results, use cod (the traditional approach) or triggerfish or grouper, which are more locally sourced. The pieces of fish should not be more than 1½ inches thick. If the pieces are too large, by the time the batter is crisp and golden, the fish could still be raw in the middle.*

### CHIPS

2 lbs Maine Kennebec (or russet) potatoes  
Peanut oil, for frying  
Malt vinegar  
Sea salt

Wash the potatoes in cold water. With a sharp knife or potato cutter, cut the potatoes ¼ inch thick and 5 inches long. Place the potatoes into a bowl of ice water (this stops them from discoloring). Heat oil in a deep fryer to 320°F. When the temperature has been achieved, remove the potatoes from the water, drain, and pat dry. Place some of the potatoes into the fry basket, making sure not to overcrowd the basket. Fry them in the oil for about 7 minutes. Place the first fried batch on a paper towel to drain and cool. When all the potatoes have been fried, turn up the temperature of the fryer to 375°F. Fry the blanched potatoes for about 3 minutes, until golden brown and crispy, again making sure not to overcrowd the fry basket. Season with malt vinegar and sea salt.



### GOOD CHIPPERS

“Growing up in Ireland, there were always a half-dozen good chippers on the main drag in Limerick; it was late-night sustenance—and soakage—after a few jars. My favorites were Donkey Fords and Dirty Dick’s, located in a dodgy area of town, but always spot-on. They, like most places in the British Isles, made it with cod, because it was the most readily available and least expensive white fish.

“For this recipe, though, any white, meaty fish will work, like triggerfish or grouper. When you are frying the fish, the idea is to crisp up the outside and just cook the inside. You want to get that crunch from the crust with perfectly cooked, succulent meat in the middle.

“And for the chips—try using Maine Kennebec potatoes, because they are the best for top-class french fries. If you can’t get them, russet potatoes work really well, too. Wrap everything up in old newspaper, add the proverbial dash of salt and vinegar, and you’re solid.”

## PECAN FRIED SOFT-SHELL CRABS WITH SHRIMP AND JAMBALAYA RISOTTO AND TOMATO-CUMIN VINAIGRETTE

*“Such a fun word, ‘jambalaya,’ and a wonderful Cajun dish. Here, we give it an upscale twist by using Carnaroli rice to create a more creamy texture.”*

S E R V E S   S I X

**6 each soft-shell crabs**  
Buttermilk  
Seasoned flour (see recipe)  
Peanut oil, for deep frying

Clean the crabs, scraping away the gills on either side of the inside of the body. With kitchen shears, cut away the face and the tail flap. Dip the cleaned crabs in buttermilk and dredge in the seasoned flour mix. Deep fry in peanut oil at 365°F for 3 to 4 minutes until golden brown.

**SEASONED FLOUR**  
1 cup ground pecans  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 Tbs kosher salt  
2 tsp ground black pepper  
1 tsp ground white pepper

**RISOTTO**  
2 Tbs canola oil  
1 cup diced andouille sausage  
1 cup diced onion  
½ cup diced leeks  
2 cups Carnaroli rice  
1 Tbs blackening spice  
¼ tsp each dried thyme, dried basil, dried oregano, cayenne, paprika, smoked paprika, cumin, and dried tarragon  
2 cups fish stock (see p. 211)  
2 cups tomato juice  
18 each large (21/25 count) shrimp, peeled, deveined and tails off  
2 Tbs Worcestershire sauce  
1 tsp Tabasco®  
¼ cup diced tomato  
¼ cup sliced scallions  
Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper

In a wide saucepan, bring the oil to medium heat. Render the andouille sausage. Add the onion and leeks and let them sweat. Add the rice and sweat again, making sure to coat the rice in the oil. Mix in the blackening spice and all of the dried herbs and spices, stirring constantly. Add ½ the fish stock and ½ of the tomato juice and cook into the rice, stirring constantly. Repeat this process for the remaining ½ of the fish stock and tomato juice. Finish the risotto by cooking in the shrimp. Season with salt and pepper and finish with the Worcestershire, Tabasco, tomato, and scallions.

**TOMATO-CUMIN VINAIGRETTE**  
8 large tomatoes  
1 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1 Tbs ground cumin  
Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper  
¼ cup aged sherry vinegar  
⅓ cup balsamic vinegar

Roughly chop the tomatoes and put in a bowl. Add the olive oil, cumin, salt, and pepper. Add the vinegars, mix, and let sit for 1 hour at room temperature. Pass through a fine mesh sieve.



### GETTING CRABBY

“When I first moved here and saw people standing around docks with strings tied to old chicken, I wondered what the hell they were doing before I figured out they were crabbing. I grew up with stone crabs in Ireland and didn’t encounter blue crabs (and soft-shells) like you have here until I lived in Connecticut. We always sautéed the soft-shells there and called them ‘Napalm’ because they would explode and spray oil everywhere. After that, I think frying like you do in the South is hands-down the way to go.

“We’ve been lucky to get our soft-shells almost year-round thanks to Kimberly’s Crabs in Mount Pleasant. She’s got tanks that help the crabs molt—that’s when their shell is soft. She’s a great character—wears shells in her hair, a gold crab necklace, and presents the crabs in damp newspaper like they are fine jewels, which they are.

“Now, about this recipe: at my house on James Island, there’s a bunch of pecan trees. My kids go out and collect the nuts and sit on the porch to crack them open. A while ago, we had a bag left over and I thought to roast and grind the nuts into flour for frying.

“Pecan-flour gives you a nutty essence that’s so good, especially if you can’t fry with peanut oil. We used the pecan-flour for this dish, but soft-shells are just as good in our house ‘fry dirt’ (see p. 202), which is just seasoned flour. With it, you dredge the crabs—first in buttermilk then in the dirt—and fry it up. Crabs fried either way are pretty rich, so you only need one or two per person.”



“Since opening in 1999—even though it looks from outside like it opened in 1899—Hank’s has been not just the most evocative, but one of the best seafood restaurants in the South. Oh, make that America. Frank McMahon is as inventive as he is respectful of culinary traditions, all amply displayed in his new book.”

—John Mariani, food, wine, and restaurant correspondent (and, since 1984, author of “Best New Restaurants of the Year”) for *Esquire* magazine