



Fit to be fried

Chefs take pride in their poultry

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LANE HARTWELL/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Derreck Johnson, owner of Oakland's Home of Chicken and Waffles, prides himself on his down-home restaurant's classic take on that retro favorite, fried chicken.

That golden, blistered skin. The juicy, glistening meat. And that delightful crunch. Fried chicken evokes in us a nostalgia for those days sitting at Grandma's kitchen table as she moved from pantry to fryer, creating crispy magic.

Now, that glorious retro favorite is back. And as chefs continue their modern-day comfort food makeovers, one thing's for sure: The grease we grew up with is gone. So are the big, sharp, crunch crystals that could slice a gum line.

From casual joints such as Oakland's Bakesale Betty and Santa Clara's 99 Chicken to Thomas Keller's Ad Hoc in Yountville and Foreign Cinema in San Francisco, chefs are experimenting with brining, cooking oils and spices to update this classic.

At Farmer Brown's Little Skillet, the trendy, walk-up eatery in San Francisco's SOMA district, enthusiasts wait up to an hour in line to get their fried chicken fix, ordered from a window in a one-way alley. If they're lucky, they'll score a cushion so



FARMER BROWN COURTESY

Fried chicken with all the fixings at Farmer Brown in San Francisco.

they can enjoy their farm fresh chicken, homemade waffles and Falls Mills grits from a perch on the curb, as opposed to leaning against a wall.

Owner Jay Foster is a proponent of fine comfort food. He grew up on fried chicken, greens and serious barbecue in Chicago and North Carolina. So when he opened Farmer Brown in San Francisco in 2006, he says, it was partly to dispel myths about soul food.

"It isn't about overspiced ribs in a brown paper bag," Foster says. "Southern

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FRIED CHICKEN AROUND THE BAY

Here's a sampling of crispy fried chicken choices. Add your favorites to our interactive map, online at www.ContraCostaTimes.com/food-wine, www.INSideBayArea.com/food-wine and www.MercuryNews.com/food-wine.

Foreign Cinema: 2534 Mission St., San Francisco; 415-648-7600; www.foreigncinema.com.

Chicken

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cooking is an amazing contribution to American cuisine. It originated with the African-American farmer, and for us that meant using local, organic ingredients grown by African-American farmers.”

Overnight, fried chicken became the neo soul restaurant's most popular dish. So, Foster followed it up by opening Little Skillet, a walk-up counter that also serves po-boys and homemade biscuits.

Fried chicken secrets

Every chef has a secret to reach fried chicken nirvana. Foster starts with free-range, Fulton Valley Farms birds that he cuts up and brines in ice and salt water — not the usual buttermilk — for 24 hours to lock in flavor. “We want people to have access to the juicy meat,” he says.

He pats the chicken dry and uses a flour mixture of paprika, cayenne, thyme, garlic, and black pepper. Then, he fries the chicken pieces in canola oil.

Martin Krawetz of Lil Biscuit House in San Mateo also skips buttermilk. Instead, he dips chicken twice in a seasoned flour mixture — it's got a Cajun kick — for that thick crust. After the first dip, the chicken pieces are wrapped, covered and placed in the fridge for 24 hours before another quick coating. Then, it's off to the fryer.

“Salt in the flour pulls moisture from the chicken and makes the mixture gluey rather than powdery,” says Krawetz, of his mom's recipe. “That's what gives it the crust.”

Yelpsters — devotees of the Yelp.com restaurant review site — go crazy over the greaseless crust and light seasoning at 99 Chicken, a strip mall stop in Santa Clara that brings new meaning to KFC. The creators of that Korean-style fried chicken, made with drumsticks and wings only, won't divulge their secrets, other than to say they use fresh chickens. Meanwhile, the Yelp crowd waxes rhapsodic.

“By far the best fried chicken I've ever had in my life!” says one of the 827 posted reviews.

They are equally passionate about the birds at Oakland's Home of Chicken and



RAY CHAVEZ/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Chef Gayle Pirie gets ready to fry chicken at San Francisco's Foreign Cinema using her signature curry and sesame seed coating blend.

Sesame & Madras Curry Fried Chicken

Serves 4

4 cups peanut oil

2 teaspoons kosher salt

3 cups buttermilk

Madras curry mix

3 tablespoons Madras curry

1 teaspoon garlic powder

Small pinch sugar

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon red chili flakes

Coating mix

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon Madras curry

2-3 tablespoons sesame seeds

Frying chicken

3-pound chicken, cut into 8 pieces, skin on

1. Combine all the curry ingredients and mix well.

2. Liberally salt chicken pieces, then lightly rub with curry mix.

(Chill overnight for maximum flavor.)

3. Mix all the coating ingredients in a large bowl.

4. Preheat the oil in a cast iron skillet to 300 degrees.

5. While the oil is warming, dip the curried chicken pieces into the buttermilk, then into the coating, covering each piece thoroughly. Set aside.

6. When the oil is hot, place chicken pieces, skin-side down, in skillet. Do not overcrowd.

7. Cook chicken on one side until golden brown, about 7-8 minutes. Turn chicken pieces and finish cooking until done, 5-7 more minutes each.

8. Place the fried chicken on a rack on a sheet pan and keep warm in a 200-degree oven until ready to serve. Serve with a fresh green salad. Also good served at room temperature or cold for picnics. In the summer, ratatouille is a wonderful accompaniment.

— Chefs Gayle Pirie and John Clark,
Foreign Cinema Restaurant

Waffles. Passionate enough to drive from as far as San Jose, according to owner Derreck Johnson.

“Fried chicken crosses every barrier, every age. It's like a melting pot here,” says Johnson, who fries his chicken — coated in seven spices — in the pan before transferring it to the fryer. “It's also a very messy process, so the idea of having it taste and feel home-cooked without having to do it yourself is what draws people.”

White tablecloth fare

But fried chicken isn't just picnic or curbside fare. One reason people are drawn to Foreign Cinema's fried chicken, served with a warm, cheddar biscuit and fresh, lime-spiked greens, is because they can enjoy its succulence with a knife and fork and in front of a date. Chef Gayle Pirie starts with organic Petaluma Farms roasting chickens. She cuts them up — the thighs are

boned out to make the dish more white tablecloth-worthy — applies a curry seasoning mixture, then covers and refrigerates the chicken pieces overnight.

The next day, Pirie coats

the chicken pieces in flour with salt, pepper, curry powder, and sesame seeds. She dips them in buttermilk and flash fries the chicken in peanut oil until lightly golden. She prefers peanut oil — fresh, never recycled — because it lacks the heaviness that vegetable oils tend to leave behind. And the sesame seeds remind her of a favorite childhood diner.

“I remember going to Zim's on Sacramento Street for the chicken in a basket,” says Pirie, who grew up in

San Francisco. “There were sesame seeds in the flour, and as a kid, I thought it was the best fried chicken ever.”

Perhaps that's the ultimate appeal of fried chicken, the reason we pound our forks on the table in debate over who has the crispiest crust and why so-and-so's is absolutely worth \$20. It reminds us of being a kid.

“It's one of those inexplicable things,” Foster says. “Fried chicken makes you feel so close to your grandma. It's kind of like apple pie.”