

THE WORLD OF Spicy Fried Chicken

A quest for the hottest bird
down south, up north and overseas

BY ANDREA LYNN



Snapshots from Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken in Memphis, TN, including owners Wendy and Matt McCrory at the helm of the fryer

Whether it's coated in a blend of chile powders or bathed in a combination of buttermilk and hot sauce, fiery fried chicken has become a force to be reckoned with. Slowly but surely, spicy fried chicken is coming into its

own all across the country. And this southern gal—who is serious about both fried chicken and spice—has been looking high and low for the best places to find it.

One such fried chicken story began 30 miles outside Memphis in Mason,

Tennessee, where Napoleon Vanderbilt opened his eatery in 1953. He wasn't frying up just any chicken, though; his was spicy-battered with a kick. Napoleon and his wife ran the successful business for 30 years until their deaths when their son, Vernon

Photos by Andrea Lynn

“Gus” Bonner, inherited both the recipe and the property, reopening the restaurant as “Gus’s World Famous Fried Chicken.” People from every corner of Tennessee flocked to Gus’s for a sample of deep-fried heaven, including Memphis resident Wendy McCrory who told us that in Memphis, you can “only take people for barbecue so many times.” Wendy would often make the trek to Mason for chicken, and she wasn’t the only one willing to travel. In 2001, GQ magazine rated Gus’s as one of the top restaurants in America worth flying to for a meal. The restaurant’s popularity increased so much, McCrory said, that “a lot of times, you would drive all the way there, and all they had were chicken thighs or were closed.” But if Gus’s was open and fully stocked, the chicken was so fresh that “you felt like they were killing them in the back.”

Wanting their Gus’s fix a little closer to home, Wendy and her husband, Matt, opened up a franchise in 2003, bringing a taste of the distinctive fried chicken to downtown Memphis. But just because they have the franchise doesn’t mean that they know Gus’s spice blend. “We haven’t been given the recipe,” Wendy admits. The original owners mix up enough batter for a daily delivery, then the chicken is marinated in it for at least 16 hours before it’s cooked to order.

Even though Wendy doesn’t have access to Gus’s secret blend, she has a few guesses on why the chicken is so crave-worthy: “There’s no big heavy batter, so the flavors and spices have the opportunity to get down in the chicken,” she said. “There’s a creeping slow burn the more you eat, but the juiciness of the meat calms down the burn.” More than 200 tons of fried chicken have come out of their fryer this past year, and Samuel L. Jackson and Justin Timberlake are two of the recipe’s more famous worshippers.

Served with Original Louisiana Hot Sauce on the tables (just in case you need further bite to your bird), the crunchy thin coating gives way to moist, tender chicken delivering a cascade of spices and building heat. The accompanying cole slaw is the perfect creamy complement to cool down the mouth.

The purely Southern potato salad is potato salad at its best: mustardy, with the sweetness of pickles. And if you haven’t gorged yourself on the fried chicken and sides, the chess pie made of vanilla custard is a dessert must-have.

These days, even some chain restaurants are delivering up spicy fried chicken, but can they do it as well as a restaurant like Gus’s? I had heard rumors of the Charlotte, North Carolina-based Bojangles’ Famous Chicken ‘n Biscuits; however, I was pretty sure the place couldn’t live up to the flavor or charm of Gus’s (and I did

coming back,” he said. So I made it the next stop on my odyssey.

Bojangles’ began in 1977 with a core menu that is the same as it is today—a distinctive fried chicken with a cayenne-heavy Cajun rub underneath the skin, fresh buttermilk biscuits, dirty rice and spicy pinto beans. With mottos like “Frozen chicken will never be as good as fresh chicken, no matter how much you bread it” and “Making sweet tea is an art form,” I was intrigued. Underneath the thick, crispy crust was succulent meat, with a kick like a Cajun mule—I was a quick convert—this was almost as good as Gus’s chicken, and is probably the best fried chicken (spicy or non-spicy) that any fast-food chain can deliver.

If your taste buds crave even more fire, Keaton’s in Cleveland, North Carolina, will fulfill your desires. Documented (and raved about) on *roadfood.com*, it’s miles off the highway exit—so much so that along the deserted, winding roads, I was convinced I was lost.

First opened in 1953 under Burette Walker Keaton, here the chicken is battered and fried before it’s plunged into a vinegary, tomato-based sauce tinged with a touch of sweet and enough heat to set the mouth blazing. While Keaton’s won’t win any awards for its décor—with signs like “No Loud Talking,” lining the walls—who cares when the food is so good? To quote Michael Stern’s *roadfood* description: “Keaton’s chicken is unlike any other: slightly crisp, slightly caramelized, and shot through with the flavor of the house barbecue sauce. It is so good it made our tipster weep with joy.” And I’ve never tasted anything quite like their addictive, crunchy shredded cabbage slaw, spiked with vinegar and hot sauce.

Frying chicken and then submerging or brushing it with a sauce is also a typical way of preparing fried chicken in Korea. According to *Chile Pepper’s* resident Korean food expert Lillian Cho, Korean fried chicken differs from the American version in that there’s less batter, allowing the skin to get “ultra-crispy.” “I like it better than most American-style fried chicken because the skin is so crisp, and there’s

Gus’s World Famous Fried Chicken

10 South Front Street
Memphis, TN
901-527-4877

Bojangles’ Famous Chicken ‘n Biscuits

bojangles.com for
East Coast locations

Keaton’s Barbecue

17365 Cool Springs Road
Cleveland, NC
800-278-1619
keatonsoriginalbbq.com

Bon Chon

314 5th Avenue, 2nd Floor
New York, NY
212-221-2222
bonchon.com/eng

Baden Baden

28 W. 32nd Street
New York, NY
(212-) 714-2266
badenbadenrestaurant.com

start to wonder if all great spicy fried chicken restaurants had to have the word “famous” in their restaurant name). But my friend, Casey Neumann, a New York City resident and North Carolina native, boasted that nothing could match the star power of Bojangles’. On trips home to Charlotte, he would hit up the airport’s Bojangles’ immediately after leaving the plane. “The fried chicken at Bojangles’ is better than any other fast food chain on the planet. Always extra crispy, super juicy, and it has just the right amount of Cajun seasonings to keep you

very little fattiness left on the skin after frying. It also doesn't feel as heavy or oily," says Lillian. The trend has really taken off at New York City restaurants like Bon Chon, which cooks wings and drumsticks before coating them in a spicy soy glaze. Lillian recommends the whole rotisserie fried chicken at New York's Baden Baden restaurant. "You can eat the chicken as it is—it's very juicy, tender and flavorful—or dip it in the sauce, which is reminiscent of Tabasco. They also give lots of fried whole garlic cloves to go with it." Korean places usually serve the chicken with pickled daikon radishes, which are a cooling, crunchy sidekick to the spicy meat. Unlike in the United States where fried chicken is picnic or Sunday dinner fare, Lillian told us that fried chicken is considered bar food in Korea, going best with a cold beer.

Brimming with inspiration from my travels, I decided to try my hand at creating my own recipes. So, I rolled up my sleeves and got to work, putting everything I'd learned on my trek into my efforts. And voilà! Spice-rubbed chicken dunked in buttermilk and flour before being fried up the Southern way, and my own spin on Asian chicken using crushed wasabi peas and panko bread crumbs for a crispy, burning crunch. So if you can't get to any of these restaurants in the near future, you can still experience the glory of spicy fried chicken.

Spice-Rubbed Southern Fried Chicken

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Medium

Take note that the chicken needs to marinate in the spice rub for 24 hours before cooking.

- 1 tablespoon salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly ground pepper
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons chile powder
- 1 tablespoon smoked paprika

- 1 tablespoon sweet paprika
- 1 tablespoon cayenne pepper
- 8 to 10 bone-in, skinless chicken thighs and drumsticks
- canola oil, as needed
- buttermilk, as needed
- all-purpose flour, as needed

In a small bowl, combine all the spices. Coat each chicken piece liberally with the spices. Transfer to a large Ziploc bag. Place in the refrigerator, and let marinate for at least 24 hours.

In a cast iron pan, fill halfway with canola oil, and warm over medium-high heat. In a large bowl, add buttermilk. In another large bowl, add flour. Dip each piece of chicken into flour, buttermilk and back into the flour. Add to the warmed oil, turning it down if it is too hot. Working in batches if necessary to prevent overcrowding, cook chicken until golden brown on each side, turning occasionally until done, about 10 to 12 minutes. Make sure the chicken pieces register 180° on a meat thermometer. Sprinkle with salt, and drain on a paper-towel lined plate.

Wasabi-Coated Fried Chicken

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Medium

- canola oil, as needed
- 1½ cups wasabi peas, finely ground in the food processor
- 1 teaspoon wasabi powder
- 1½ cups panko bread crumbs
- whole milk, as needed
- 1 egg
- salt and freshly ground pepper
- 6 to 8 boneless chicken thighs

Preheat oven to 350°. In a cast iron pan, fill halfway with canola oil, and warm over medium heat. In a large bowl, combine ground wasabi peas, wasabi powder and panko bread crumbs. In another large bowl, whisk milk and egg together. Season the milk with salt and pepper. Dip each chicken

piece into milk and then into the wasabi-panko mixture. Add to the warmed oil. Cook chicken, turning often, until golden brown, around 8 to 10 minutes. Be careful because the wasabi-panko mixture burns easily.

Once the chicken has browned, transfer to a baking sheet. Cook in oven until the internal temperature registers 180°, about 5 to 7 minutes. Sprinkle with salt, and drain on a paper-towel lined plate.

Spicy Barbecue Chicken

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Medium

Adapted from keatonsoriginalbbq.com. Keaton's Barbecue Sauce can be purchased on the website. Otherwise, use your own spicy barbecue sauce or spike a mild one with hot sauce until desired heat is achieved.

- 10 ounces Keaton's Barbecue Sauce or other spicy barbecue sauce
- canola oil, as needed
- all-purpose flour, as needed
- salt and freshly ground pepper
- buttermilk, as needed
- egg
- 1 whole chicken, cut into 10 pieces

Add barbecue sauce to a saucepan, along with 1¼ cups water, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to low, and simmer for 5 minutes. Take sauce off of heat.

Meanwhile, in a cast iron pan, fill halfway with canola oil, and warm over medium-high heat. In a large bowl, combine flour, salt and pepper. In another large bowl, combine buttermilk and egg, and whisk together. Dip each chicken piece into flour, then into the buttermilk mixture and then back into the flour. Working in batches to prevent overcrowding, add coated chicken into the warmed oil. Cook until golden brown, around 8 to 12 minutes.

Using tongs, dip each piece of fried chicken into the barbecue sauce until fully coated. Serve.

Photo by Bill Milne





Chicken Tempura with Spicy Dipping Sauces

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Medium

For the spicy cashew dipping sauce:

1 cup roasted cashews
1 garlic clove, smashed
2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 jalapeño, chopped
1 tablespoon honey
2 scallions, chopped
¼ cup sesame oil
2 tablespoons water
¼ cup to ½ cup canola oil

For the orange-ginger dipping sauce:

1 cup orange juice
½ cup crystallized ginger, roughly chopped
salt and freshly ground pepper


For the chicken:

canola oil, as needed
4 skinless, boneless chicken breasts
24 wooden skewers, soaked in water
½ cup all-purpose flour
1 cup cornstarch
1 cup club soda
salt and freshly ground pepper

Make the spicy cashew dipping sauce: In the bowl of a food processor, add all ingredients except water and canola oil. Purée mixture, and add water into the feeder tube. Then, add enough canola oil until the mixture is smooth. Reserve.

Make the orange-ginger dipping sauce: In a small pan over high heat, add the orange juice and crystallized ginger. Bring mixture to a boil. Cook until reduced and thick, about 5 to 7 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Cool, and reserve.

Make the chicken: In a small pot, fill three-fourths of the way with canola oil, and warm over high heat until the oil registers 350°. Slice the boneless chicken breasts into 1-inch pieces, and thread onto skewers. In a medium bowl, add flour, cornstarch, club soda, salt and pepper, and whisk until smooth. Mixture needs to be thin, so add more club soda if needed.

When the oil is heated, dip each skewered piece into the tempura batter, and then add to the oil, a few at a time. Cook until golden, about 2 to 4 minutes. Remove from oil, and drain on a paper towel-lined plate. When all the chicken is cooked, serve with the two dipping sauces. 

Chicken Tempura with Spicy Dipping Sauce; dipping sauce dishes courtesy of Korin Japanese Trading Company (korin.com)

Photo by Bill Milne