

FORK IN THE **ROAD**

Fried Chicken - Southern Style Shall Rise Again!

Carmen Juch

Colonel Sanders shared his secret blend of 11 herbs and spices with us in the 20th century, and thus fried chicken made at home slowly became a thing of the past to many since the ease of picking up a batch without going through the work has its perks. Since that time, home-made fried chicken, with mashed 'taters, fresh biscuits and honey, of course, became something that today's young think only comes in a bucket or a box.

Everyone who shares my kind of

childhood memory will conjure up a picture of fried chicken and the fixings as the Sunday dinner with the entire family. And I do mean entire - the uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents, even great grandparents. The recollection is a picture all of the family gathered round the table after a good Bible thumping at church, sharing a meal. A wing and a drumstick still bring a song to my heart. I figure we all also believe our family created some of the best fried chicken ever to touch our lips. And that is as it should be ... in our memories anyway.

Good fried chicken is like really good pizza and can be eaten either hot or cold, making it the perfect staple for a picnic and the perfect quick next-day lunch. Pack it up, and ride to the park and then tell me I'm wrong.

I don't really know if we southerners were the first to fry chicken but I like to think we perfected the technique. I do realize that there are

about two or three zillion different fried chicken style recipes including the ones with sauces like General Joe's overly sweet and gooey, the Cajun-style fiery hot, Indian, pollo frito, whatever, but I don't count that as "southern" fried chicken as I am sure you don't either.

A little research finds that the Scots are given the responsibility for first frying their chicken. Probably this was a just another way to serve up "Ms. Too-Tough Chicken" anyhow that's my thoughts on the subject. The first recorded recipe was in the third printing of "Virginia House-Wife" (1828) by Mary Randolph. Over the years her simple recipe has been revamped numerous times including by the "Colonel" and by Mr. Popeye. From the simple dredging of cut up chicken parts in flour, salt and pepper fried in fat to the high-falutin' process we have today, it's no real surprise people aren't frying the chicken for themselves any longer. "Too much time and too much trouble" is what most people would say.

There can be some lively dialogue about what constitutes "real" southern fried chicken. How the chicken is coated, is there a batter or merely a seasoned flour dredge? Do you double dip? And of course, the fat, to use bacon grease, lard or Wesson oil (it all comes back but one tablespoon or so the commercial told us)? There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the skin stays but some recipes that affirm themselves as the *true* southern version tell you to remove the skin before battering. I think not.



Here are some of my "truths" to lip smacking perfect southern fried chicken. No batter, flour seasoned dredge only, corn oil such as Wesson to which ideally bacon grease has been added and a black cast iron skillet and an overnight soak for "little chickie" in buttermilk. Also, as chicken is removed from the oil it should be placed in a warm oven to maintain the crisp.

I have a dozen good fried chicken recipes but this one I am sharing below is the one I consider to taste the most authenticate southern style fried chicken. What is called "soul food" now, but that many of us just considered good home cooking when we were children. And what, I ask you, says love more than a platter of fried chicken, perhaps with some smashed 'taters and corn on the cob on the side on a summer afternoon? This is no time to worry about the diet.

And my final truth about fried chicken? I don't really care what Emily Post says. Fried chicken should be eaten with your fingers and you absolutely should *lick them* between bites.

Let's prep.

So, if you're ready, let's start with discussing just one of the many but most critical elements for success when frying chicken. Buy a thermometer. Your mama and your granny may have been able to tell when the oil was hot but if you aren't able to do this, don't guess. Good crispy chicken depends on the oil being the right temp from start to

finish. The temperature of your oil should be 375 degrees before you slide the first piece into the oil. It should maintain that temperature whenever a new batch goes into the oil. If it doesn't your chicken will be limp and oily and don't blame me.

You're going to need some of those heavy-duty zip lock bags to marinate in and to shake the chicken in the seasoned flour. I find that works the best but you can use containers.

Next you want to buy a nice young tender chicken, cut up or you can cut it up, whatever. I'm not too good at cutting chicken up and we end up with surprise parts we didn't know existed so I buy cut up myself. Place the pieces in a zip lock bag and cover with buttermilk and leave it in the fridge, ideally overnight, but at least a few hours.

Now, I believe in the big black cast iron frying pan but if you honestly don't have one, then use a frying pan that is deep and heavy and can hold at least 3 inches of oil without getting close to the top. Place it over medium heat and add oil, such as Wesson, until it is about 3 inches deep, maybe even four. For the best flavor, add about 3 tablespoons of bacon grease to the oil once it has reached the 375 degree mark and let it melt in.

As you place the chicken pieces in the oil, be careful to slide them in away from you to keep from splattering and burning yourself and it is important that you don't overcrowd because it will keep the chicken from

frying correctly. Fry the chicken until outside is golden brown and crispy, about 15 to 20 minutes, turning once to brown all sides. Reduce heat to 350 degrees and fry until cooked through, about 15 minutes longer. Turn once during that time. Drain chicken on brown paper pages that have paper towels on top.

Each time you begin to fry another batch of chicken, be sure to add more shortening and bacon grease as necessary, and to bring the temperature back, as for the first batch so that you will get the same uniformly delicious southern fried chicken.

Seasoned Flour

1 tablespoon rosemary
1 tablespoon oregano leaves
1 tablespoon ground sage
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon dry marjoram
1 1/2 teaspoons thyme
3 tablespoons brown sugar, packed
2 tablespoons dry parsley flakes
1 teaspoon pepper
1 tablespoon paprika
2 tablespoons garlic salt
2 tablespoons onion salt

Mix these all together and ground them to a powder in a processor. Use two heaping tablespoons to 1 cup flour. For super crispy fried chicken, use 1/2 cup each of flour and cornstarch and 1/2 teaspoon of baking powder along with the 2 tablespoons of the seasonings.

And don't forget to lick those fingers!