Crispy Fried Chicken

A SWEET-TEA BRINE, A BUTTERMILK SOAK AND A FRY IN LARD: CHEF JOSH GALLIANO DETAILS THE STEPS BEHIND HIS RENOWNED RECIPE.

CHEF JOSH GALLIANO believes that perfect fried chicken can’t be rushed. His secret is this careful sequence: He plumps the bird in a sweet-tea brine overnight and then tenderizes it with a buttermilk–hot sauce soak the next day. Then he dredges it in a mix of cornmeal, cornstarch and flour (plus his own homemade Creole seasoning) and fries it to a shattering crisp in a cast-iron skillet of lard. The result is so delicious—the crunch, the briny juiciness, the peppery spice—that his special monthly fried chicken dinners at the Libertine in St. Louis have sold out for nearly two years running, and now he’s planning a second restaurant that will focus on his renowned recipe. “There is a difference when you brine, when you soak, when you fry with lard. That’s the traditional flavor,” Galliano explains. Coming from a long line of chicken fryers, he respects that tradition: His mother grew up in rural Mississippi, where every Sunday it was her job to go out back and “get the chicken” so her grandmother could fry it up in a big cast-iron skillet. “My customers say my chicken reminds them of the fried chicken their families made when they were young,” he says, “and that’s a hell of a compliment.”

—SARAH DIGREGORIO

PHOTOGRAPHS: TARA FISHER; FOOD STYLIST: JORDAN BOURKE
Creole-Spiced Fried Chicken

Active: 1 hr; Total: 13 hr; Serves 8

Frying chicken in lard makes the crust light, crunchy and less likely to get soggy as it cools. Look for rendered fresh lard at butcher shops and farmers’ markets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8 cups water</th>
<th>2 cups buttermilk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 bags English Breakfast or other black tea</td>
<td>¼ cup Louisiana-style hot sauce, such as Crystal or Tabasco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼ cup kosher salt</td>
<td>2 large eggs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tbsp. sugar</td>
<td>2 cups all-purpose flour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¾ cup JG Creole Spice Mix (recipe at right)</td>
<td>2 cups fine cornmeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two 3½-lb. whole chickens, cut into 8 pieces each</td>
<td>¼ cup cornstarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rendered pork lard or canola oil, for frying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make the Tea Brine and Buttermilk Soak

1. In a large saucepan, combine the water with the tea bags, salt, sugar and 2 tablespoons of the Creole spice mix. Bring just to a boil, stirring to dissolve the salt and sugar. Let the tea steep for 10 minutes. Discard the tea bags and let the brine cool completely. Submerge the chicken in the brine, cover and refrigerate for at least 6 hours.

2. In a large bowl, whisk the buttermilk with the hot sauce, eggs and 2 tablespoons of the Creole spice mix. Drain the chicken, discarding the brine. Add the chicken pieces to the buttermilk mixture, turning to coat completely. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight.

Fry the Chicken

3. Preheat the oven to 250°. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with wax paper. In a large bowl, whisk the flour with the cornmeal, cornstarch and remaining ½ cup of the Creole spice mix. Remove the chicken from the buttermilk, letting the excess drip back into the bowl. Dredge the chicken in the flour mixture, then transfer to the prepared baking sheet.

4. In a large, heavy saucepan, heat 1½ inches of lard to 350°. Set a rack over a rimmed baking sheet. Add half of the coated chicken to the lard and fry at 300°, turning occasionally, until golden brown and an instant-read thermometer inserted in the thickest part of each piece registers 155°, 15 to 18 minutes. Transfer the fried chicken to the rack and keep warm in the oven while you fry the second batch.

WINE Lively, citrusy sparkling wine: NV Joseph Cattin Crémant d’Alsace Brut.

JG Creole Spice Mix

Makes 1¼ cups

This recipe makes ½ cup more than you’ll need for the chicken. You can also triple or quadruple it to use in gumbo or jambalaya, or mix it one to one with light brown sugar to use as a dry rub for brisket, ribs or pulled pork.

In a medium bowl, whisk together ½ cup paprika, 1½ cup plus 2 Tbsp. kosher salt, 2 Tbsp. garlic powder, 2 Tbsp. onion powder, 2 Tbsp. black pepper, 1 Tbsp. dried thyme, 1 Tbsp. dried oregano, 1 Tbsp. dried basil, 2 tsp. cayenne, 1½ tsp. sugar and ½ tsp. crushed red pepper until evenly combined.

A Pictorial Tutorial

1. BRINE THE CHICKEN in a solution of black tea, salt and sugar for 6 hours.
2. MIX BUTTERMILK, hot sauce and eggs to make a flavorful, tenderizing soak for the chicken.
3. COMBINE CREOLE SPICES with flour, cornmeal and cornstarch for a seasoned crust.
4. FRY THE CHICKEN in batches in rendered lard until it’s golden brown and crisp.