FRIED CHICKEN

Chef Thomas Keller / Chapter Five

MASTERCLASS

FRIED CHICKEN

"I'm happy to say that fried chicken is back, with some of the best chefs across the country and some of the best restaurants frying chicken."

CHAPTER REVIEW

When Chef Keller was a boy, the fried chicken he knew and loved the best was from a fast food chain. His palate has evolved since then. Early in his career, Chef Keller found that fried chicken had fallen out of favor in many kitchens. Today, it's back in fashion, and a mainstay at many top restaurants around the country. This version of the dish is the same fried chicken served every other Monday at Chef Keller's restaurant Ad Hoc in Yountville, California.

Chef Keller starts with a whole chicken, which he cuts into 10 pieces and sets for 12 hours in an herb-lemon brine. You can get away with brining for less time—8 hours will suffice in a pinch, but no less. But you certainly do not want to brine for much more than 12 hours, as overbrining will affect the texture of the chicken, potentially giving it a cured texture. Once brined, dredge the chicken pieces in seasoned flour, dip them in buttermilk, dredge in flour again, and then fry until the crust becomes a crisp and golden brown. Chef Keller recommends frying in peanut oil—an oil with neutral flavor, less saturated fat than lard or shortening, and a high smoke point—but if peanut allergies are an issue, another vegetable oil will do. Be safety-minded, as you're working with hot oil. And of course, enjoy the results of your cooking.

PREP & COOK TIMELINE

Day 1

Make brine — Portion chicken — Brine 8-12 hours

Day 2

Bring chicken to temperature
Prep dredging bowls — Heat oil — Dredge chicken: flour mix, buttermilk, and flour — Fry chicken — Let rest, then serve

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PROTEIN

Mise en place

Serves 2 to 3

Ingredients

FOR THE BRINE

1 2½ to 3 pound chickens
5 lemons, halved
6 bay leaves
½ bunch (115 grams) flat-leaf parsley
½ bunch (30 grams) thyme
85 grams clover honey
1 head garlic, halved through the equator
14 gramsblack peppercorns
1 cup (10 ounces) kosher salt
3 ¾ liter or 1 gallon water

FOR THE SEASONED FLOUR

360 grams all-purpose flour
20 grams garlic powder
15 grams onion powder
5 grams paprika
4 grams cayenne
6 grams kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

FOR THE FRIED CHICKEN

1 quart buttermilk
Seasoned flour (recipe above)
Peanut oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Ground fleur de sel or fine sea salt
Rosemary sprigs for garnish

METHOD

PREPARE AND BRINE THE CHICKEN:

Mix all of the brine ingredients into 1 gallon of water and bring to a boil. Once boiling, remove from heat and let cool; then pour into a container large enough to hold both the brine and the chicken pieces and cool in the refrigerator until chilled.

Using poultry shears, cut out the backbone. Pull out the breastplate and trim the excess fat. Make sure to reserve the bones and fat for use in a stock and schmaltz. Cut the first half into 5 pieces: separate the thigh from the breast and the drumstick, remove the wing, and cut the breast in half. Repeat with the other half of the chicken. You should end up with 10 pieces: 2 wings, 2 legs, 2 thighs, and 2 breasts cut in half. Place the cut chicken in the cold brine and let it sit for 12 hours. (If you're short on time, you can brine for 8 hours; but do not brine for more than 12 hours or the chicken will become too salty.)

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Equipment

FOR THE BRINE:

Stockpot
Container (for brining)

FOR THE FRIED CHICKEN:

Cutting board
Knife
Poultry shears
2 bowls, wide enough for dredging
Deep-fat frying thermometers
Cast-iron skillet
Tongs
Sheet pan with grate, lined with paper towels
Mortar and pestle

FRY THE CHICKEN:

Remove the chicken from the brine and discard the brine. Rinse under cold water, removing any herbs or spices sticking to the skin. Pat dry with paper towels, or let air-dry. Let rest at room temperature until it comes to room temperature.

Set up a breading station. Combine all the coating ingredients in a large bowl. Pour the buttermilk into a third bowl and season with salt and pepper. Spread a large piece of parchment paper on your countertop beside the coating bowl.

Fill the cast-iron pan with 2 inches of oil and heat to 325°F. Try to maintain this temperature throughout to achieve a golden-brown color on the outside and a fully-cooked piece of chicken on the inside. Dip each of the chicken pieces into the bowl of coating, turning to coat and patting off the excess. Then dip each of them into the buttermilk, allowing the excess to run back into the bowl. Finally, return them to the bowl of coating, turning to coat once again. Transfer each piece to the parchment paper.

Begin frying the chicken, starting with the dark meat or the thickest pieces. Carefully lower the drumsticks and thighs into the hot oil. Adjust the heat as necessary to return the oil to 325°F. Fry for 2 minutes, then carefully move the chicken pieces around in the oil and continue to fry, monitoring the oil temperature and turning the pieces as necessary for even cooking.

About 4 minutes into the cooking time, add the white meat pieces to the pan. Adding the additional chicken pieces to the pan will cause the temperature of the oil to fall, so turn the heat up to help it recuperate and return to 325°F. After about 7 more minutes, when the chicken is golden brown and very crisp, check for doneness with a probe thermometer—it should register 160 to 165°F. Remove the chicken from the pan using tongs and transfer to a cooling rack, skin side up.

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FRY THE CHICKEN:

Add sprigs of rosemary to the pan and fry until they stop sizzling.

Pulverize kosher salt using a mortar and pestle until ground to a fine powder. Sprinkle it over the chicken. Remove the rosemary from the oil and transfer to cooling rack.

Arrange the chicken on a serving platter and top with the fried rosemary leaves. To serve as Chef Keller does, try the additional recipes for braised greens and mashed potatoes on the following pages.

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ACCOMPANIMENTS

BRAISED GREENS:

Mise en place

Ingredients

1000 grams swiss chard
1000 grams collard greens
100 grams canola oil
500 grams yellow onion, ½-inch dice
10 grams kosher salt
40 grams garlic, minced
300 grams bacon lardons, ½-inch dice
200 apple cider vinegar
100 sugar
500 grams chicken stock, plus more as needed
300 grams cherry tomatoes, halved

Equipment

Chef's knife
Cutting board
Salad spinner
Rondeau or large pot with lid
Rubber spatula or wooden spoon
Serving vessel or airtight container (for storage)

METHOD

Trim the stems of the swiss chard and collard greens and cut the leaves into 1 ½-inch pieces. Wash the greens well and then dry in a salad spinner.

Heat a rondeau or large pot over medium heat and add the canola oil. Once the canola oil starts to shimmer, add the bacon lardons, onions, and kosher salt and sweat until the onions are soft and translucent and the bacon has rendered. You do not want to brown the onions. Add the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add the sugar and apple cider vinegar, stir to incorporate, and continue to reduce until a syrupy consistency is achieved. Add 500 grams of chicken stock and the greens. You will have to add the greens gradually as they wilt down. Once all the greens are in the rondeau, cover and continue to simmer over low heat, checking every 15 minutes to add chicken stock as needed.

The cooking process should take about 2 hours or until greens are very tender. Add chicken stock as needed to continue to braise. Once greens are very tender, remove from heat, and season with kosher salt and apple cider vinegar to taste. Fold in the halved cherry tomatoes and serve.

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ACCOMPANIMENTS

MASHED POTATOES

Mise en place

Note: Chef Keller's recipe for mashed potatoes is very similar to his recipe for potato purée, which he teaches in his first MasterClass. The difference is that putting potatoes through a ricer rather than a tamis changes the amount of fat the potatoes can take in, as well as the texture. Chef Keller's mother used an old-fashioned potato masher, which resulted in a more rustic texture.

Ingredients

190 grams cream, hot
225 grams cold butter, cubed
50 grams clarified butter (optional)
750 grams Yukon Gold potatoes
Warm water as needed
Kosher salt
Butter for finishing
Maldon salt for finishing

Equipment

Cutting board
Paring knife
Saucepot
Slotted spoon
Ricer
Saucepan
Wooden spoon

METHOD

Place the whole, unpeeled potatoes in a 3-quart saucepot and cover with 2 inches with cold water. Slowly bring the water to a gentle simmer. The potatoes are cooked whole to prevent them from absorbing the water, and therefore, allowing you to incorporate more butter and cream. Cook the potatoes until they are extremely tender when tested with a paring knife. When ready, turn off the heat. Working one potato at a time, remove from the water, and press through a ricer. Once all of the potatoes have been riced, transfer them to a saucepan. Warm the saucepan over medium-low heat, use a stiff rubber spatula to incorporate a third of the hot cream into the potatoes, and stir in a few cubes of butter with the rubber spatula until the butter is emulsified into the potatoes. Drizzle in a little clarified butter. Clarified butter adds a more intense butter flavor than whole butter. Keep adding the cream, butter, and clarified butter to develop a light, fluffy consistency.

Once you've achieved your desired texture, season with salt, transfer to a serving bowl, and top with a pad of butter.

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LEARN MORE

- In this lesson, Chef Keller describes enjoying Nashville-style hot fried chicken at a famous restaurant in Tennessee. If the idea of hot, or spicy, fried chicken appeals to you, experiment with different levels of cayenne pepper in your seasoning, and take notes on what degree of spiciness suits your palate best.

- For his fried chicken, Chef Keller uses 2½ to 3-pound chickens, which are relatively small and not always available at grocery stores, where chickens tend to run 3 to 4 pounds. You can use these larger chickens, but smaller chickens are worth seeking out at your local farmer's market or butcher shop. Not only are they easier to cook properly at the temperatures Chef Keller recommends, but they also result in the optimal meat-to-crust proportion. Chef Keller recommends that you get to know your purveyors, so that you know where your chicken comes from.

- If you're meal planning for the week, make enough brine to brine two chickens. One chicken will be brined whole for roasting later in the week, as it will require two days of air-drying. Roast the chicken following the technique in Chapter 9: Oven Roasting: Chicken. Never reuse brine and always keep it refrigerated.