

MIDWESTERN FRIED CHICKEN

and Gravy

Compared to Southern fried chicken, Midwestern-style fried chicken offers different joys. Both are a treat, of course, but when I recall the pan-fried chicken of my Midwestern youth, I remember the gravy being the star.

The recipe begins the way you might expect. You soak the chicken briefly in buttermilk and fry it until crisp in a shallow pool of fat (lard if you want to get authentic). But here's where it veers off: Then you bake the chicken until the meat begins to sag on the bone, giving you time to whip up a creamy liquid-gold gravy made from the sticky brown pan deposits. There's a natural progression here, but the baking of the chicken can sometimes wreak havoc on the crust: how do you keep the skin really, truly crisp?

When I was invited to a dinner party at an Amish house twenty miles down the road, I found the answer.

The chicken skin looked a lot like my mother's chicken—the color and texture of the rough side of cowhide. The crust crackled at the fork—a little more loudly than my mother's, or mine. Around the table, everyone was engaged in a sort of triangular communion with their fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and puddle of magnificent gravy. "Deborah," I asked our hostess, "how do you keep it so crisp?" Her reply: "Cracker meal. I use half cracker meal, half flour." I glossed a piece of milk bread with her marigold-yellow butter and her glassy strawberry jam, and finished the meal in the heavy, warm glow of kerosene lamplight and good conversation.

Later, as we pulled onto the blacktop, I whipped out my cell phone and called my mom with the news.

SERVES 4 TO 5

Put the chicken pieces in a large bowl, and add the buttermilk, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon black pepper, the thyme, and 4 of the garlic cloves. Marinate for at least 1 hour at room temperature or, refrigerated, overnight.

Preheat the oven to 350°F, and set a baking sheet fitted with a rack on the middle shelf.

Meanwhile, prepare the chicken coating: Combine the 1½ cups flour, the ground crackers, 1¾ teaspoons salt, 1 teaspoon pepper, and the paprika in a large bowl. One at a time,

- 1 4- to 4½-pound chicken, cut into 10 pieces (see page 151)
- 1 cup buttermilk
- Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme
- 7 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1½ cups plus 5 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup finely ground buttery crackers, such as Ritz or Club (about 1 sleeve)
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- About 2 cups lard or canola oil, for frying
- 1 small bunch fresh sage
- 2½ cups chicken stock, low-sodium store-bought or homemade (page 299)
- Mashed potatoes, for serving

RECIPE CONTINUES

Quick Homemade Stock

You can make stock from the backs, ribs, necks, and scraps left over from portioning a chicken—and a homemade stock makes the best gravy. Season the chicken parts with salt and pepper, and add to an oiled saucepan over medium heat. Brown the meat lightly on both sides. Pour off any excess oil, cover the meat with cold water, and season with a little salt. Add some onion tops or garlic skins, half of a carrot, celery tops, parsley stems—whatever herb or vegetable trimmings you have on hand. Simmer the stock for 30 to 40 minutes, and then strain it through a fine-mesh sieve, discarding the solids. Makes about 3½ cups.

take the chicken pieces from the buttermilk and dunk them in the flour dredge, pressing hard to make the coating adhere to every spot. Set aside on a plate.

In a large, high-sided cast-iron pan, add lard or oil to a depth of 1 inch. Heat over medium-high heat until a droplet of water sprinkled on the surface sizzles loudly.

Give the chicken pieces a fresh roll in the flour mixture if they've absorbed it, and add as many pieces of the dark meat (thighs, wings, and drumsticks) as will fit comfortably in the pan. Fry, turning as needed, until all sides turn dark golden brown, 10 to 12 minutes. Transfer the cooked chicken to the baking sheet in the oven. Continue frying the rest, saving the white breast meat until last, and being careful not to burn the residue forming at the bottom of the pan; that's your gravy base. When it is browned, add the chicken to the baking sheet. (Ideally the dark meat should bake in the oven for about 20 minutes and the light meat for about 10 minutes, until cooked through.)

Pour the fat in the pan into an empty saucepan (a safe place to let it cool down), and discard all but 2 tablespoons of the brown sludge at the bottom of the pan. (If any of it looks burnt, discard that as well.) Let the pan cool down for a minute. Then add the remaining 3 garlic cloves and the sage, and fry for 1 minute. Add the remaining 5 teaspoons flour and cook, stirring, until the mixture is smooth and light brown, about 2 minutes. Add the stock and whisk until smooth. Cook the gravy over low heat until it thickens softly, about 5 minutes.

Season the gravy with salt and pepper to taste, remove the garlic and sage, and pour it into a spouted pitcher to pass behind the hot chicken and the mashed potatoes.

Cutting a Chicken into Ten Pieces

Set the chicken on a cutting board, legs pointing toward you. Make an incision between a leg and the breast and open the leg to separate it from the body. Flip the chicken over, press down on the back, and find the thigh socket on the back of the chicken; cut around the joint. Try to rope in the nugget of meat in the small of the chicken's back (the "oyster"), just above the thigh joint. Slice downward toward the chicken's rear to free the leg. Repeat with the other side so that you have two chicken legs. Make a diagonal cut through the joint between the thigh and the drumstick on each leg, to make four pieces of dark meat.

Pull out the wings and cut generously around one wing joint, freeing the wing and including a bit of the breast meat with it; repeat with the other wing. Cut off both wing tips at the joint, and save them for stock.

Put the chicken into a shoulder stand on your board. Cut downward, through the ribs, separating the front from the back of the chicken, and bend the back until it is doubled over. Free the entire back from the breast. (Save the back and ribs for stock.) Lay the breast skin-side down. Trace a line down the center of the cartilage and press down on it to cut through the breast, separating it in half. Whack each breast half in half again, to make four pieces of white meat—or ten chicken pieces total.

