



*Commune with Southern soul on
a tasty tour of Dixie*

By Matt Alderton

FRIED CHICKEN IS FOOD for the senses; all five of them, in fact. It tastes good, of course: juicy, salty, savory. It's abundantly tactile, thanks to its crispy coating and moist, unctuous meat. Its aroma is distinct, and its crunchy, golden profile is a sight to behold.

And if you're listening, fried chicken even speaks, says Darin Sehnert, chef-owner at Chef Darin's Kitchen Table, a hands-on cooking school in Savannah, Ga., where he teaches the art of making classic Southern dishes.

"When you understand where a dish comes from — the cultural and historical influences behind it — you have a better appreciation for it," explains Sehnert, who says fried chicken's story is distinctly Southern. "Fried chicken is all-American, but really, it's a regional dish. When you think of fried chicken, you think of the South."

Indeed, sampling fried chicken is the perfect way to experience the American South. Whether you're Southern-born and-bred or a Yankee who's embarking on a Southern sojourn, learning about it — and then eating as much of it as possible — will give you a sense of place that's only possible via your palate.

A TASTE OF HISTORY

Fried chicken is at once wholly American, yet also uniquely global, according to Sehnert, who says food historians trace fried chicken's roots primarily to West African slaves.

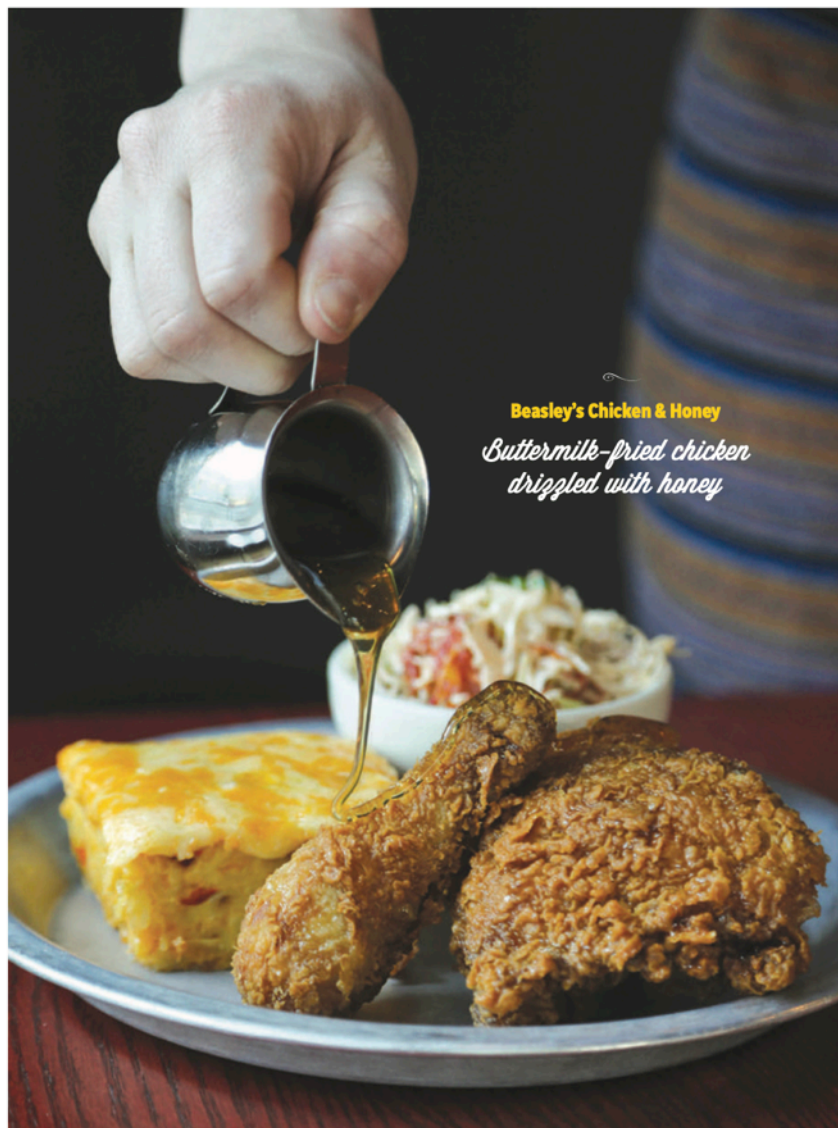
"Frying was heavily used in Africa, where Africans would extract oil from palm kernels to use as a frying medium," Sehnert says.

"When they were brought to the United States as slaves, they used lard because pigs — which had been brought to the South by the Spanish in the 1500s — were a ready source of fat that was easily rendered out."

Chickens, too, were easy to raise and slaughter.

"Chickens were often raised by slaves on plantations to supplement the diet

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Beasley's Chicken & Honey

*Buttermilk-fried chicken
drizzled with honey*

GETTY IMAGES; ANGIE MOSIER

plantation owners provided them," continues Sehnert, who says fried chicken increased in popularity and practicality after the Civil War. "You had financial devastation on both sides of the conflict, and chickens were something people could raise in their yard if they lived in town. On top of that, fat could be reused multiple times, so frying in general was a very economical way of cooking."

In difficult times, fried chicken was a saving grace — especially for African American women who made a post-emancipation living selling fried chicken to white passengers from train platforms.

Unfortunately, the other side of subsistence was suffering. "Fried chicken ... gave people license to create ugly, fried chicken-related stereotypes (about) African Americans," Adrian Miller, author of *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time*, wrote in a 2016 article for online food magazine *First We Feast*. "African Americans were negatively depicted in various media as pathological chicken stealers, pre-eminent chicken fryers and voracious fried chicken eaters. This was part of a concerted effort during the 19th century to dehumanize the newly freed African Americans."

The first fried chicken recipe in an American cookbook — *The Virginia Housewife*, published in 1824 by Thomas Jefferson's cousin, Mary Randolph —

was straightforward.

"Cut (chickens) up ... dredge them well with flour, sprinkle them with salt, put them into a good quantity of boiling lard and fry them a light brown," it reads.

If you ask food guru Lee Brian Schrager, less is still more nearly two centuries later. "In my opinion, the best fried chicken is often the simplest to make," says Schrager, founder of the Food Network & Cooking Channel South Beach Wine & Food Festival and co-author of *Fried & True: More than 50 Recipes for America's Best Fried Chicken and Sides*. "Typically, it begins with cold chicken that gets dipped in seasoned flour and then dropped in hot oil — that's it."

The best way to discover your own flavor biases may be to fry your own chicken, which you can learn to do during Sehnert's Low Country: Fried Chicken Social class. Held regularly, the session costs \$100 per person and lasts 3.5 hours. Students learn to prepare an authentic Southern meal with fried chicken as the centerpiece.

FINGER-LICKING FAVORITES

If you'd rather skip straight to the good part — eating — the South is teeming with restaurants where you can connect with its roots by sampling regional cuisine.

For a classic and casual take that's quintessentially Southern, try **Willie Mae's Scotch House** in New Orleans. Established in



JOSEPH WOODLEY



"Fried chicken is
A MIRROR
THAT REFLECTS
WHEREVER YOU
ARE IN THE
COUNTRY."

— Tim Quinlan,
Harvest general manager



Mama Dip's Kitchen
No-frills fried chicken

MAMA DIP'S KITCHEN

1957, it's been at its current, humble location since 1958. Although Hurricane Katrina destroyed it in 2005, it reopened in 2007, and has been seamlessly serving its birds — perfectly seasoned and not at all greasy — to long lines of hungry visitors.

Two more old-time institutions are **Martha Lou's Kitchen** in Charleston, S.C., and **Mama Dip's Kitchen** in Chapel Hill, N.C. Neither fancy nor fussy, both shine for their authenticity. At the former, where a muraled pink exterior is as distinctive as its fried-to-order chicken, 90-year-old Martha Lou Gadsden still serves no-frills soul food on Styrofoam plates, as she has since 1983. At the latter, owner Spring Council and her siblings serve the same simple recipe that their late mother used when she opened the restaurant in 1976.

In Raleigh, N.C., **Beasley's Chicken + Honey** features a more modern take on fried chicken. Brined, dipped in buttermilk, dredged in flour, then cooked in a pressure fryer, the crispy finished product comes with a drizzle of honey and is best enjoyed perched atop a light and airy waffle, alongside a local craft beer.

Should your chicken-fried travels take you to Tennessee, **Gus's World Famous Hot and Spicy Fried Chicken** in Mason and **Hattie B's Hot Chicken** in Nashville's Midtown are two stops worth making. Gus's is known for its crispy, slightly spicy skin and uber-moist meat; Hattie

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B's for its painful-yet-pleasurable heat, which it owes to its cayenne-heavy coating.

Peak poultry perfection also exists in Kentucky, where you can experience fried chicken at both its cheapest and its chicest. The cheap, but no less delicious, version resides in Corbin, where Col. Harland Sanders — who singlehandedly turned a regional dish into an international obsession — operated the original Kentucky Fried Chicken from 1940 until 1956.

Today, the **Harland Sanders Café and Museum** is home to its own KFC restaurant, a model of the Colonel's original kitchen and a Sanders-centric museum.

On the opposite end of the culinary spectrum is farm-to-table fried chicken at **Harvest** in Louisville. Non-GMO, antibiotic-free, pasture-raised and locally sourced chicken soaks for at least 24 hours in hot sauce and buttermilk before it's battered, fried and served with tangy greens, woodsy bourbon gravy and a garnish of house-made hot sauce.

"Fried chicken is a mirror that reflects wherever you are in the country," says Harvest's general manager Tim Quinlan. "The quality of the dish isn't just about how good the chicken is — fried chicken is always good — but rather, the entirety of the plate and the picture it paints of the region you're in."

Thanks to fried chicken, the picture in Dixie is always pretty close to perfect.



MARIELA PITA/THE VIRTUAL REVAMP