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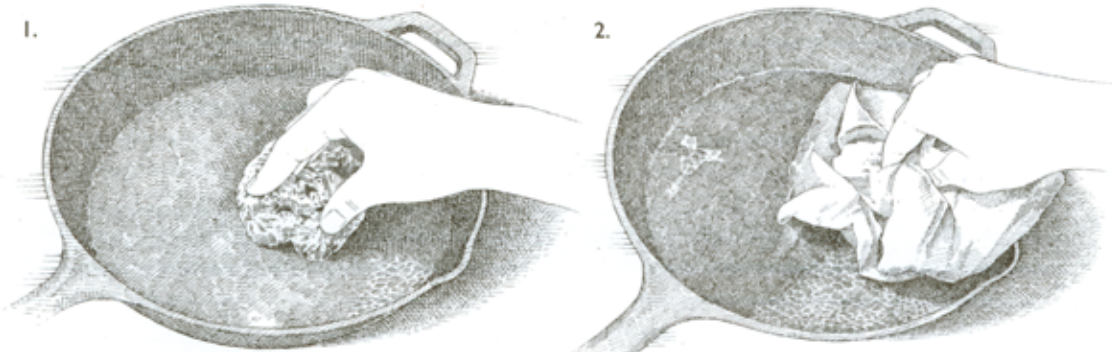
Cook's Illustrated, American Classics 2008, Pages 2 - 3

Quick Tips

≧ COMPILED BY THE COOK'S ILLUSTRATED TEST KITCHEN ≦

Cast-Iron Care

Cast-iron pans often build up crud that can be difficult to dislodge with a sponge, and cleaning cast iron with a soapy scrubber pad will affect the seasoning. Mary Flynn of Naples, Fla., found that aluminum foil makes an effective (and safe) scrubbing device. After using paper towels to wipe excess grease from a cooled pan, she follows the steps below.



1. Scrub the pan with a wad of heavy-duty aluminum foil, removing stuck-on food.
2. Rinse and dry the pan, then reseason it by using paper towels to wipe it with about 1 tablespoon oil.

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The Ultimate Crisp Fried Chicken

How do you make fried chicken with a grease-free, ultracrisp crust and moist, deeply seasoned meat?

BY KAY RENTSCHLER AND BRIDGET LANCASTER

Fried chicken is so patently American, so perennially "in," that it travels with a band of unassailable icons, like Coca-Cola and apple pie. What makes it so great? First, the crust. Crisp and crackling with flavor, the crust must cleave to the chicken itself, not flake off in chips, and it should be a deep, uniform mahogany with no evidence of greasiness. As for the chicken itself, it should be tender, seasoned, and flavorful.

The truth is, though, frying chicken at home is a daunting task, a messy tableau of buttermilk dip and breading, hot fat, and splatters one hopes will end at the stove's edge. The results are often tantamount to the mess: greasy, peeling chicken skin and dry, unseasoned meat.

The Chicken Before the Egg

First off, we decided against poorly butchered packaged chicken in favor of a whole bird cut at home into 12 manageable pieces (see "Cutting It Down to Size," page 23). In our first stove-side excursion, we fried up several batches of chicken with different coatings, oils, and so on. But our real interest resided beneath the skin: half of the chickens had been brined for two hours; the other half had not. The tasting results were unequivocal: unbrined chicken earned marks far below its brined competition. The reason? Seasoning. Seasoned food has more flavor. Who wants to bite through a crisp, rich, seasoned crust only to hit white Styrofoam? Brined meat is also juicy, which meant our brined chicken parts fried at equal rates, relieving us of the need to baby-sit the white meat or pull the wings out of the fat early.

Soaking chicken pieces in some kind of liquid before breading is traditional in fried chicken recipes. This process is thought to tenderize the meat (a mistaken assumption) and add flavor. We examined a number of soaking solutions and found the bright acidic flavor and clinging viscosity of buttermilk to produce the best flavor accents and richest browning during cooking.

Instead of soaking the chicken in buttermilk alone, why not add the saline blast of a brine, doubling the rewards and minimizing the number of steps? To get a leg up on the idea, we made it a flavored brine, adding a mountain of crushed



For the home cook, pan-frying works better than deep-frying.

garlic, a couple of crushed bay leaves, and some sweet paprika. This remarkable "twofer" won high marks indeed, well above those garnered by a unilateral soak or brine. We also spiked the brine with ¼ cup of sugar—not enough to sweeten but enough to bring other flavors out of hiding.

A Coat of Many Crumbs

Fried foods taste irresistibly good when dressed in crumbs or flour, but what kind of coating is best? To find out, we tested straight flour against a panoply of options: matzo crumbs, ground saltines, cornflakes, ground Melba toast, cornmeal, and panko (Japanese bread crumbs). Cornflakes and Melba toast fared badly, burning and becoming tough. Cornmeal was also a loser; even a negligible amount mixed with flour betrayed a carbon grittiness. Matzo, saltines, and panko all elicited initial favorable reviews, but these coatings shared one common liability: they chipped. They were on the skin, not of it. Plain flour—requiring in this instance no seasoning whatsoever since the chicken had been brined—surpassed all other options for the integrity and lightness of the crust it produced.

RECIPE TESTING:

Pots and Pans for Frying

Though a skillet would seem the natural choice for frying chicken, the deeper sides of a Dutch oven solve the splatter problem and create condensation that helps to keep the chicken tender.

Cast-iron skillet

Price: about \$25

Comments: The lid for this squat skillet basically sat on top of the chicken, giving the hot, moist air nowhere to go.



LODGE Cast-iron Dutch oven

Price: \$34.99

Comments: The ¼-inch-thick walls of this pot took 10 minutes or more to heat, but once they did, it maintained its oil temperature and fried the chicken to perfection.



ALL-CLAD Dutch oven

Price: \$257.95

Comments: This sturdy entry took on heat quickly but lost it, and failed to recover it, once the chicken entered the fat. The chicken did not color easily.



LE CREUSET Enameled Dutch oven

Price: \$229.95

Comments: A rather pricey version of the Lodge pan, the thinner cast-iron walls of this beauty heated up fast and stayed that way. The enamel surface made cleanup a cinch.



Many fried chicken recipes use a single breading process in which the chicken is dipped first into beaten egg, then into flour or crumbs. A double, or bound, breading dips the chicken into flour first, then into egg, and finally into flour or crumbs. In side-by-side tests we were surprised to discover that single breading was actually messier than double,

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lacking the latter's dry, first flouring, which maintains tidiness and establishes control before the egg dip. The double breading offered a superior base coat without being overly thick or tough. In terms of the egg wash, whole eggs provided the best balance; yolks alone were too fatty, and whites lacked body.

Air Play

Another practice that has made its way into many fried chicken recipes is that of air-drying breaded chicken before frying, which supposedly crisps up the skin. We tested the effects of air-drying the chicken before and after breading and compared the results with chicken that underwent no air-drying. Both air-dried versions were superior in terms of crust, though the previously air-dried, just-breaded chicken proved superior with a lighter and crisper, flakier texture.

While this version initially seemed ideal, we noticed that its delicate crispness succumbed to sandiness and porosity over the course of a few hours, making it unacceptable. The memory of a particularly light but resilient crust on a chicken-fried steak recipe we had once made persuaded us to add baking soda and baking powder to an egg wash bolstered with buttermilk. We hoped the sandiness in the crust that developed over time might thus be offset. Stirred into the wash, 1/2 teaspoon of soda and 1 teaspoon of powder produced just enough carbon dioxide to lighten the breading to perfection—and also remained crisp as it cooled.

Fry Time

We quickly ruled out deep-frying in favor of pan-frying, which is much more manageable for home

cooks. In this method, only half the chicken is submerged in the fat at any point and must be flipped. The oil stays hotter and, theoretically, produces less of a mess. And, after judging several different oils for smoke point, flavor, and crust crispness, we most preferred peanut oil; Crisco vegetable shortening came in a close second.

While a cast-iron skillet seemed the obvious choice for pan-frying, splatters were dramatically reduced when we used a Dutch oven. In fact, a cast-iron Dutch oven maintained temperature significantly better than anything else we tried. Covering the Dutch oven during the first half of the frying did one better. It reduced splatters to a fine spray, maintained oil temperature impeccably, and fried the chicken through in about 15 minutes total versus the 20 minutes per side recommended in many recipes. This time-efficient frying method made up for the fact that the chicken needed to be fried in two batches. As much as we would have liked to find a way to fit 12 pieces into a 12-inch Dutch oven all at once, success eluded us. But it was really no big deal. It simply meant that by the time the second batch was fried up, the first batch was cool enough to eat.

ULTIMATE CRISP FRIED CHICKEN

SERVES 4 TO 6

Maintaining an even oil temperature is key to the success of this recipe. An instant-read thermometer with a high upper range is perfect for checking the temperature; a clip-on candy/deep-fry thermometer is fine, though it can be clipped to the pot only for the uncovered portion of frying.

- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons table salt
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 3 medium garlic heads, cloves separated
- 3 bay leaves, crumbled
- 2 quarts low-fat buttermilk
- 1 whole chicken (about 3 1/2 pounds), giblets discarded, cut into 12 pieces (see illustrations below)
- 4 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 large egg
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 3-4 cups refined peanut oil or vegetable shortening

1. In large zipper-lock bag, combine salt, sugar, paprika, garlic cloves, and bay leaves. With rubber mallet or flat meat pounder, smash garlic into salt and spice mixture thoroughly. Pour mixture into large plastic container or nonreactive stockpot. Add 7 cups buttermilk and stir until salt and sugar are completely dissolved. Immerse chicken and refrigerate 2 to 3 hours. Remove chicken from buttermilk brine and shake off excess; place in single layer on large wire rack set over rimmed baking sheet. Refrigerate uncovered for 2 hours. (After 2 hours, chicken can be covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated up to 6 hours longer.)

2. Measure flour into large shallow dish. Beat egg, baking powder, and baking soda in medium bowl; stir in remaining 1 cup buttermilk (mixture will bubble and foam). Working in batches of 3, drop chicken pieces in flour and shake dish to coat. Shake excess flour from each piece, then, using tongs, dip chicken pieces into egg mixture, turning to coat well and allowing excess to drip off. Coat chicken pieces with flour again, shake off excess, and return to wire rack.

3. Adjust oven rack to middle position, set second wire rack over second rimmed baking sheet, and place on oven rack; heat oven to 200 degrees. Line large plate with double layer paper towels. Meanwhile, heat oil (oil should have 2 1/2-inch depth in pan) to 375 degrees over medium-high heat in large 8-quart cast-iron Dutch oven with diameter of about 12 inches. Place half of chicken pieces skin-side down in oil, cover, reduce heat to medium, and fry until deep golden brown, 6 to 8 minutes; after about 3 minutes, lift chicken pieces with tongs to check for even browning; rearrange if some pieces are browning faster than others. (Spot-check oil temperature; after first 6 minutes of frying, oil should be about 325 degrees. Adjust burner if necessary.) Turn chicken pieces over and continue to fry, uncovered, until deep golden brown on second side, 6 to 8 minutes longer. Using tongs, transfer chicken to paper towel-lined plate; let stand 2 minutes to drain, then transfer to rack in warm oven. Replace paper towel lining on plate. Return oil to 375 degrees and fry remaining pieces, transferring pieces to paper towel-lined plate to drain, then transferring to wire rack with other chicken pieces. Cool chicken pieces on wire rack about 5 minutes and serve.

STEP-BY-STEP CUTTING IT DOWN TO SIZE

