

A Kentucky CLASSIC

Gourmand Seeks the Best Fried Chicken

By Robert Bolson
Photos by Brian Tietz

“Why did the chicken cross the road?” In the commonwealth, a practical answer could be this: to avoid the cook’s grasp. After all, this is the birthplace of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the late Col. Harland Sanders, known worldwide for developing his famous “finger lickin’ good” chicken, is certainly the state’s most famous and prolific chicken cook.

Long before Sanders perfected his well-guarded recipe in Corbin

in the 1940s, mothers, grandmothers, and other Kentucky cooks from Paducah to Pikeville had been serving mouth-watering “southern fried chicken” to their families, friends, and other delighted guests. But rarely will you ever find two fried chicken recipes exactly alike. Chicken recipes can be as unique as Kentucky’s many fine bourbons and as secret as the exact amount of gold stored in Fort Knox.

Bob Thompson, a well-known Colonel Sanders look-alike, savoring a piece of the real thing.





The Beaumont Inn is lauded for its “yellow-legged” fried chicken.

CONSUMER AWARENESS:

American consumers purchase 85 pounds of chicken per person annually, but in today’s health-conscious climate, fried chicken ranks a mere fourth for favored method of chicken preparation, behind “in a casserole,” “grilling/barbecuing,” and America’s current favorite, “baking/roasting.”

BEST
Fried Chicken

According to *The Dictionary of American Food and Drink*, southern fried chicken (chicken parts, traditionally bone-in, floured or battered, then fried in hot fat) is “perhaps the best-known and best-loved southern dish of all.”

Richard Lobb, director of communications for the National Chicken Council in Washington, D.C., notes, “Kentucky is practically the homeland of fried chicken.”

Several weeks ago I set out on a cholesterol-craving, unscientific, yet exciting, quest to find out just how good is Kentucky’s fried chicken. My plan: sample all of the fried chicken I could locate in the vicinity. Conventional chain restaurants offering assembly-line fried chicken were strictly off-limits, as was any other fried-chicken dish not containing the traditional chicken bones.

I wanted classic fried chicken, the kind my

grandmother and mother used to prepare in a black, well-seasoned iron skillet ... crispy, crunchy, plump, and juicy, and fried to golden perfection.

Armed with only my pen, my notepad, and my opinionated palate, I visited 10 Central Kentucky establishments noted for their fried chicken.

For a fried chicken lover, it was a labor of love.

Beaumont Inn

Beaumont Inn is Kentucky’s oldest family-operated inn. Constructed in 1845, the building that is now the Beaumont Inn was a school for young women. The school, known as the Greenville Institute, was owned and operated by Dr. Samuel Mullins until it closed in 1855. Today’s Beaumont Inn has welcomed guests since 1919.

Beaumont Inn offers its famous “yellow-legged” fried chicken served with green beans, whipped potatoes, and corn pudding for \$14. The chickens’ legs supposedly begin to turn yellow when the chickens are fed only corn, but the National Chicken Council could not confirm this particular piece of chicken lore. Beaumont Inn serves only fresh chickens from the region. The chicken, fried in pure lard, is served piping hot, moist, and meaty and with a divinely light and flavorful crust. If you’re still extraordinarily hungry, the staff will bring you even more of this fabulous fried chicken. Just ask. For an elegant, yet relaxed dinner in a soothing Southern setting, it is hard to beat Beaumont Inn.

Café Jennifer at the Woodlands

Nestled discreetly at street level of Lexington’s prestigious Woodlands Condominiums, Café Jen-

The Claudia Sanders Dinner House attracts legions of devoted locals and tourists, who relish the traditional chicken and plentiful side dishes.



DOUG PRATHER

nifer is a favorite of Woodlands' residents and a long-standing fine-dining experience. The quiet and cozy restaurant features many Kentucky favorites and is open to the public, offering locally grown produce in a stylish setting. The fried chicken, available for lunch or dinner, is ideal when you want comfort food served in upscale surroundings. The dinner includes two southern-style chicken breasts with your choice of two sides for \$14. I chose the jalapeño corn pudding and mashed potatoes. The chicken breasts were moderately sized, crispy, and hot from the skillet. The overall taste was unexceptional but, nevertheless, satisfying. When you find yourself craving fried chicken and you happen to be in the downtown area, make Café Jennifer your next stop.

Claudia Sanders Dinner House

The former home of Harland Sanders and his wife, Claudia, this favorite dining spot for thousands of locals and tourists each year originally served as the base of operations for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Claudia Sanders opened the dinner house, located in Shelbyville, in 1968. It was destroyed by fire in 1999, then rebuilt and reopened on the same site. All entrees are served "family style" with choices from among eight vegetables, including baked apples, Harvard beets, green beans, mock oysters, corn pudding, breaded tomatoes, creamed spinach, and mashed potatoes. All breads, pies, and cobblers are also homemade. True buttermilk biscuits and cornbread are both made from scratch. The all-you-can-eat chicken dinner is a very reasonable \$12.95. The late Mrs. Sanders' fried chicken, served hot and definitely delicious, is reminiscent of her famous husband's chicken, only better. A peek inside the official *Claudia Sanders Dinner House Cookbook* reveals her favorite ingredients:

salt, black pepper, marjoram, sage, savory, thyme, and celery seed — four fewer ingredients than the Colonel's mysterious 11. If you like chicken, and crowds, you will like Claudia Sanders.

Indi's

Situated in a former dry cleaning store on Lexington's north side, Indi's hails itself as "home of the spicy and mild chicken." You can drive up or walk in, but you cannot dine in as there are no tables or chairs. It's takeout and drive-through only, and you must pay cash — no credit cards or checks accepted. The place is small, but the chicken pieces are big. For only \$4.99, Indi's gives you four plump, very crispy pieces of fried chicken (breast, thigh, leg, wing) along with three large, tasty potato wedges and a roll. You can choose spicy, hot, or mild chicken. It is not unusual to see cars lined completely around the building, filled with people waiting to order. If you're on the go or looking for a meal to go, stop by Indi's. You won't be disappointed.

Kessler's 1891 Eatery & Pub

Kessler's Southern fried chicken was included in the July 2004 issue of *Southern Living* magazine, which featured some of the South's best fried chicken. Nearly a year after that article was pub-



Cars line up outside Indi's on North Broadway for chicken to go.

Poultry is a feather in Kentucky's business cap

BY THE NUMBERS:

- Kentucky's poultry industry provided more than a half-billion dollars in farm gate receipts (profits returned to farmers) in 2003. Egg production accounted for more than **\$83 million** in sales.
- Kentucky is the eighth-largest producer of broiler chickens in the nation, producing **1.49 billion pounds** of broiler chickens in 2003.
- Kentucky ranks **seventeenth** in the nation for all chicken production.
- Kentucky's poultry industry is the **No. 3 agricultural commodity** in the state, trailing only the equine industry and the beef cattle industry.

Source: Bill Clary, director of public relations, Kentucky Department of Agriculture.



Merrick Inn's Bobby Murray takes a hands-on approach to preparing fried chicken.

BEST Fried Chicken

lished, I found the fried chicken to be surprisingly unremarkable. I did not detect any special seasonings or preparation, and the service was quite slow. The three-piece mix of Kessler's chicken is \$10. Add \$2.50 for all white meat. The meal includes two sides and bread (if you ask for it). While it is possible to experience a less-than-memorable serving of food at any establishment, this particular meal certainly did not seem like "some of the best."



Kentucky: Home to the World Chicken Festival

Each September for the past 15 years, London, Ky., has hosted the World Chicken Festival, home of "the world's largest skillet." The festival has been voted one of the Kentucky Tourism Council's "Top Ten" events and the Southeast Tourism Society's "Top 20" events. It has also been voted "Best Festival In State" by *Kentucky Monthly* magazine. For more information, visit www.chickenfestival.com.

Merrick Inn

For the past three decades the Murray family has owned and operated Merrick Inn, one of Lexington's most popular restaurants. Merrick Inn is located in the immaculately maintained manor house of Merrick Place, once one of the finest Thoroughbred farms in the Bluegrass.

Merrick's fried chicken, four plate-filling pieces (breast, thigh, wing, leg), is one of the most popular items on the Merrick menu. Described as "Fried Chicken, one half, 'cut to be eaten with the fingers,'" Merrick's chicken dinner, served with pure honey and a choice of side items, is the most expensive in the region at \$18.95 — and some of the most delicious. Merrick Inn's service makes you feel like a member of the family. You might even be tempted to slip off your shoes. You can also add a piece of the restaurant's legendary chicken to any entree on the menu.

If you're hungry for some of the best fried chicken in Lexington and want to dine where many others from the horse industry do, race over to Merrick Inn.

Old Stone Inn

Old Stone Inn in nearby Simpsonville is a national historic landmark and was built by slave labor with stones taken from a quarry on the property, which once was a frontier coach stop. Its two-foot-thick stone walls bear bullet holes from the Civil War. It is one of the oldest stone houses in Kentucky. Situated on the Midland Trail, Old Stone Inn has been a tavern, stagecoach inn, and private home since being built in the early 1800s. Early guests at Old Stone Inn included President Andrew Jackson and the famous revolutionary General Marquis de Lafayette. Old Stone Inn opened as a restaurant in 1922. The seasoned fried chicken dinner includes Yukon Gold mashed potatoes and gravy and southern-style green beans, all for \$13. Marinated overnight in a garlic and pepper seasoning, the chicken was perfectly prepared, light, and luscious with a delectable crust. Each bite was a pure delight. Only a 45-minute drive from Lexington, Old Stone Inn is a must-visit when you want some of the most memorable, mouth-watering fried chicken in Kentucky. I definitely plan to dine there again.

Pantry Fresh Market

Pantry Fresh is best known around Lexington for its hot carryout plate lunches and dinners. A mere \$4.99 buys you any plate lunch, consisting of "one

meat, two sides, drink, and roll.” The fried-chicken plate lunch is your choice of white meat (one breast) or dark meat (two pieces); those with bigger appetites can add a piece for only 99 cents more. I chose a carryout meal of white meat with mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and a cornbread muffin. Pantry Fresh’s chicken is marinated, batter-dipped, and deep fried for 15 minutes. Moments later I was dining on a very large and, unfortunately, very greasy chicken breast with a delightfully light crust. It was tasty and hot, and if not for the surprisingly plentiful amount of grease in the bottom of the carryout container, I would be tempted to return soon.



Parkette Drive-In

Parkette proclaims itself “a Kentucky tradition since 1951” and is famous in Lexington for its carhops and “Kentucky Poor Boy” double-decker cheeseburger. The drive-in remains much the same as it was when it first opened almost 55 years ago. Parkette’s Fried Chicken Box is available in half or quarter dinners. Both are served with cream gravy, crinkle-cut French fries, coleslaw, and a hot, buttered roll. The half-chicken box, all white meat, includes two plump and pleasing breasts for \$6.99. If you prefer the mixed dinner, you will get a breast, a leg, and a thigh for \$6.59. If you love eating lip-licking good fried chicken and want to eat it curbside, Parkette is definitely the place for you.

Springs Inn & Springhurst Suites

The Springs Inn is self-described as “a Lexington tradition since 1948.” Its southern fried chicken is “fried golden brown and served with country (i.e., milk or cream) gravy.” The meal is a very reasonable \$10.95 and includes the choice of two sides. The chicken serving was pleasing and plentiful. With a crispy crust on the outside and moist meat on the inside, the Springs Inn’s chicken is just the thing when you want a traditional fried-chicken dinner in an equally traditional setting. If you have a heartier appetite, don’t miss the Kentucky buffet on Wednesday evenings that includes fried chicken, country ham, fried fish, and bread pudding.

And the winner is ...

So after two weeks of chasing the best chicken in the Bluegrass, it was finally time to make my decision. Whose was the best? The answer was actually rather easy. One particular restaurant stood out from the crowd: the Beaumont Inn. Bite for bite, Beaumont Inn’s fried chicken cannot be beat. The crust is light, crisp, and full-flavored and the meat, deliciously moist and oh-so succulent. Each mouthful is something to savor. If I didn’t know better, I would have sworn my grandmother was back in the kitchen.

For my taste, I can’t wait to return to Beaumont Inn and feast upon its yellow-legged fried chicken. 🐔

The Parkette’s plentiful half-chicken box dinner is best consumed curbside.

BEAUMONT INN 638 Beaumont Inn Drive (off U.S. 27) Harrodsburg, (859) 734-3381 www.beaumontinn.com	MERRICK INN 3380 Bates Creek Road Lexington, 269-5417 www.murrays-merrick.com
CAFÉ JENNIFER 111 Woodland Avenue Lexington, 255-0709	OLD STONE INN 6905 Shelbyville Road Simpsonville, (502) 722-8200
CLAUDIA SANDERS DINNER HOUSE 3202 Shelbyville Road, U.S. 60 Shelbyville, (502) 633-5600 www.claudiasanders.com	PANTRY FRESH MARKET 720 Henry Clay Boulevard Lexington, 254-2256
INDI’S 670 North Broadway Lexington, 233-7985	PARKETTE DRIVE-IN 1230 East New Circle Road Lexington, 254-8723
KESSLER’S 1891 EATERY & PUB 197 South Main Street Versailles, 879-3344	SPRINGS INN & SPRINGHURST SUITES 2020 Harrodsburg Road Lexington, 277-5751