



How to fry a chicken

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

This is an adaptation of a piece I wrote for a cookbook that hubby, Chuck and I put together for the Mortons Gap Christian Church a few years ago.

One of the hallmarks of southern cooking is its simplicity. It may take some time, but generally there aren't a lot of ingredients because, in the old days, sometimes there weren't a lot of ingredients around and one had to make do. This pattern of simple ingredients remains today, even though times are certainly better for most of us than it was in the south a hundred years ago.

Picking The Right Yard Bird

Many years ago, if folks didn't live on a farm themselves, they often went to a local butcher for their meat and poultry. They would pick the cut or bird they wanted and tell the butcher exactly how they wanted it dressed. Back when Lovan's Grocery was open here in southern Hopkins County, word got around quickly when there was a delivery and would head up to the store to get their choice while it was fresh.

When picking a chicken for frying, some folks, like Mama Lou Gatlin, would double check their birds for freshness. How? Mama Lou, who lived well into her 90's and passed just a couple of years back, said that it was always in the smell. After picking out a likely fryer she would open the bag and give it a good whiff. A fresh bird always smells different from one that's been around a while and Mama Lou could always tell the difference.

The Old Fashioned Way

Many folks think that the secret to a great southern fried chicken is in the herbs and spices. But the real secret is in the simplicity — forget the herbs and spices. Way back when most of our mothers and grandmothers where in their younger years, fancy fixings were pretty scarce in these parts. However, every kitchen had a few basics on hand: salt, pepper, flour, lard and a whoppin' big cast iron skillet.

Now first, you must cut up your chicken. My mother, Barbara McGregor Hunt, taught me how to cut up a chicken in the same way that her father, William McGregor, taught her. He learned the art at about age 8 from a butcher he had gone to work for.

With the breast meat, there are a couple of variations for dressing out the bird. The oldest method, which I use, is to include a "pulley bone" piece, which will give you 3 more or less even sized breast pieces per bird. If you do not know how to cut up a whole chicken with the pulley bone, ask an older person in the neighborhood and they'll show you how. If you can't figure that out, cut it up the Mama Lou way: simply chop each breast piece in half; it will give you four fairly even pieces. Freshly cut-up chicken has a totally different taste from those pre-packaged cuts, and under no circumstances should you buy an already cut up bird. If you're going to have to do that you may as well go buy a bucket from that other place

Next, place your cut up chicken in a large bowl and cover it with cold water; sprinkle it with about 2 tablespoons of salt and refrigerate it for at least 3 hours. (In the old days we didn't bother refrigerating the chicken, but nowadays it's smarter.)

The Recipe

This is my mother's method for frying a chicken, which is the same way that her father did it, and his mother before him, and it dates back to well into the



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The best fried chicken is made with a fresh bird and just a handful of kitchen staples.



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An idealized print of various poultry breeds is shown.



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A woman making biscuits in a remarkably orderly kitchen.

1800s. With a bow to modern vegetable shortening and it's lower cholesterol, this recipe is an authentic as a Saturday night bath.

1 whole fryer chicken, cut up and soaked
A large cast-iron skillet
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1 cup flour, more or less
Shortening or lard for frying

Drain the saltwater from the chicken, rinsing if you wish. In the old days, if it was on hand some families would pat the chicken dry and dip it in some buttermilk before dredging. My mother almost never had buttermilk and just left the chicken

wet after draining it and then dipped it in the flour. Either way, this method will give you moist, crispy chicken.

Melt an inch or so of shortening in the skillet till it's hot but not smoking (about medium heat).

Meantime, combine the flour, salt and pepper in a wide shallow container like a pie plate. Reserve about 3 tablespoons of the seasoned flour to make the gravy and discard the rest.

Dredge each piece of chicken in the flour blend and carefully place into the hot skillet, starting with the thighs and legs and ending with the gizzard, heart, neck and liver.

Leave plenty of room between the chicken pieces and do the frying in a couple of batches if necessary.

Fry each piece on one side until it is nicely browned, then turn. Do not turn them too much or your chicken will lose it's crust. After all of the pieces are browned, return them all to the pan and reduce the heat to low. Cover the skillet and leave cook the chicken for about 25 minutes, carefully turning only as needed to keep the it from burning.

When the chicken is cooked through, turn the heat back up to medium and allow the skin to re-crisp if you wish. Remove each piece from the pan as it gets done and place it on brown paper from a sack or on a paper towel lined platter. Cover it with a clean dish towel to keep it warm while you make the gravy.

Chicken Gravy

Drain all but 3-4 tablespoons of grease from the frying pan after your chicken is done. Sprinkle about 3 tablespoons of the seasoned flour you reserved over the oil and stir often, scraping up the browned bits from the skillet until the flour is as browned as you want it.

The key to good gravy is having enough grease in the pan. If after adding the flour it looks all lumpy and dry in the pan it means you need to add a little more grease.

Once the flour is browned, reduce the heat and very carefully add 1 ½ -2 cups milk to the skillet. It will sizzle like mad when you first add the milk but don't worry, just keep your hands clear of the skillet so you don't get burned. Once the sizzling stops, raise the heat and stir the gravy constantly until it is thickened and heated through. Do a taste test and add a little more salt or pepper if needed.

If you don't have milk or don't want a creamy gravy, just use water instead.

Quick Buttermilk Biscuits

My grandmother, Louisa Crick McGregor, was an expert biscuit maker, and made them so often that she could still do it after she lost her eyesight.

As with fried chicken, good buttermilk biscuits take very few ingredients and are better the less they are fussed with. Most biscuit makers swear by White Lily brand, but it's not absolutely necessary as long as the flour is of good quality and hasn't been sitting in the cupboard for eons.

Remember, overworking the dough will result in biscuits that are tough as shoe leather and only good for feeding the birds with.

2 cups white, all purpose flour, plus about ½ cup for dusting
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
¾ cup shortening or cold butter
1 cup (or more) cold buttermilk

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F. Use a 7x11-inch biscuit pan or a round cake pan for best results.

Combine all of the dry ingredients in a big mixing bowl. Cut the shorting or butter into pieces and then cut it into the flour by criss-crossing two butter knives or using a pastry blender, until the flour turns into coarse crumbs.

Add the buttermilk and combine it only until it is just blended in. If the dough is dry, add more buttermilk so that it becomes a slightly wet, heavy dough.

Turn the dough out onto a well floured board, then flip it so that both sides are coated with dry flour. Gently knead it 3 or 4 times, then using floured hands, pat the dough out until its about an inch thick.

Using a biscuit cutter or a floured glass, cut the dough into rounds. Ball up the dough and gently re-pat it to cut more biscuits until you have 8. Lay each one in the pan so that it touches the others.

Bake for 15-20 minutes or until the biscuits are raised and golden brown. Remove from the oven, brush with melted butter if you wish and serve immediately. Makes 8 large biscuits.