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'Hot chicken' migrates north from Nashville



By MARGARET LITTMAN |

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The hot chicken at Parson's Chicken & Fish

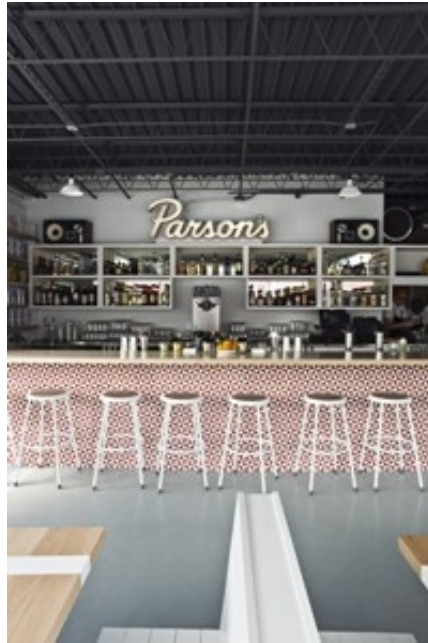
Nashville may be famous for country music, but it's also known for a delicacy called “hot chicken.” The uber-spicy fried chicken is as indigenous to the city as deep-dish is to Chicago. Most often it is pan-fried, not deep-fried like other fried chicken, and the spices are marinated or brined in, so your eyes water at every bite. (Want proof? Watch chef Sean Brock attempt to eat Music City's hottest on PBS' “The Mind of a Chef.”)

The history of hot chicken is up for debate, but most people believe it started in the 1930s as a dish a woman made to punish her philandering beau. But he liked it extra hot, and Prince's Hot Chicken Shack (recently lauded by the James Beard Foundation) was born.

A number of Chicago eateries, including **the Southern Chicago** and **Leghorn Chicken**, are selling their takes on the Nashville specialty. In February, **Parson's Chicken & Fish** introduced Tuesday Nashville Hot Chicken nights.

“We love the lore behind Nashville's Prince's, and it was easy to decide we wanted to offer it,” Leghorn chef Sieger Bayer says. It wasn't easy, however, to come up with the recipe, he says. He tested more than 100 spice blends before developing one that worked.

Most traditional hot chicken recipes are guarded with a ferociousness typically saved for international security secrets. Parson's chef Hunter Moore uses rendered chicken fat to make a paste and mixes it with roasted garlic, cayenne, chipotle and other spices. The result is a bird spicy enough to make your eyes water but not hot enough to cause pain, a line with which many hot chicken chefs struggle. "I did not want it so hot that people say, 'This makes me feel terrible when I eat it,'" Mr. Moore says.



Clayton Hauck

Parson's has introduced Tuesday Nashville Hot Chicken nights.

Messrs. Bayer and Moore both use deep fryers. In Nashville, each piece typically is individually pan-fried, but that means you may wait 40 minutes or more. Parson's and Leghorn are making more than 600 dishes a day, and the chefs said using the cast-iron pan was not practical.

The Parson's hot chicken is served in the traditional manner: with a slice of white bread and a pickle.

No matter where you try it, when you order be careful to say "hot chicken." Referring to it as "fried chicken" in Nashville is a gaffe worse than putting ketchup on your hot dog in Chicago.

—Margaret Littman



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