

## TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

### Fried Chicken

*Creativity and craftsmanship launch the king of comfort food to bigger menu opportunities*

By Katie Ayoub

Fried chicken is arguably the most craveable comfort food in America, and one that is rich with nostalgia. That homespun narrative, along with its irresistible charms, has kept fried chicken on menus for decades. It finally evolved a few years back as part of the Southern renaissance, which pushed Southern fare out of its traditional confines and into modern interpretation. And now we're looking at the third wave, where fried chicken is joining the ranks of better burgers, gourmet pizzas and eclectic tacos. Chefs are paying glorious attention to detail: the brine, the batter, the seasoning, the glaze, the garnishes, and, of course, the chicken itself.

The golden-fried opportunity is huge. Diners are hungry for comfort classics with refined culinary touches—maybe a bit of heat, some global adventure and surprise elements. And look who's jumping into the fryer: Danny Meyer and David Chang. Zeroing in on the fried chicken sandwich, both of these restaurateur superstars have made big moves. David Chang has opened Fuku, a fried chicken sandwich joint in New York. His Spicy Fried Chicken Sandwich stars chicken thighs marinated in habanero purée, coated in buttermilk, dredged in a spice blend, fried, then placed inside a steamed potato roll with pickles and Fuku butter, which is spiked with fermented chickpea. Meanwhile, Meyer launched an LTO at New York's Shake Shack last summer called the ChickenShack, a crispy, all-natural, antibiotic-free chicken breast sandwich with lettuce, pickles and buttermilk mayo.



Following the burger boom, fried chicken is a bonafide craze, prompting the Shake Shack to introduce an LTO called the ChickenShack sandwich, a crispy, white-meat alternative.

*“Much like the burger boom, fried chicken is the trendy cousin. Chicken is a platform ingredient for flavor—it’s moved past Southern and is now seeing a universal influence. Fried chicken—bone-in or boneless, used as a standalone feature, on a sandwich build or in salads—can drive sales, entice craveability and lead a menu.” -*

Rob Corliss

What Meyer and Chang see so clearly is how innovating around fried chicken casts a wide net, luring consumers across generations. It hits on today's deepest-rooted consumer demands: authenticity of experience and culinary craftsmanship. And whether it's expressed through global mash-up or eclectic Southern, at its core, fried chicken is comfort food, a consumer favorite no matter the demographic.

Some concepts are placing added emphasis on the provenance of the chicken. The menu at Richard Blais' Crack Shack in San Diego centers around organic, free-range chicken cooked on a wood-fired grill or deep-fried. Over at New York's Root & Bone, free-range chicken stars in the Crispy Free-Range Bucket of Bird. Crisp in Chicago sources fresh, hormone-free chicken. As with other culinary movements today, provenance and integrity help give momentum to the fried chicken trend.

*"Comfort foods never die; they just get reworked. Fried chicken is nostalgic, familiar and craveable by its very nature. Serve it with flavored butters, shake-on seasonings, and use various breading systems to add texture."*

- Charlie Baggs

Although Applebee's Grill & Bar doesn't currently menu fried chicken, Corporate Executive Chef Michael Slavin has insight into the trend's potential. "If you go into fried chicken, you need to do the proper research, set the standard higher than anyone in your competitive set, and show respect for tradition, authenticity and technique," he says. "When you land on a product that is truly special, it's okay to be audacious and stand for something that is truly the best version in town." Slavin suggests this interpretation: a fried chicken sandwich with a sweet-tea brined chicken breast, "cornbread" breading, fried in peanut oil, served on a cheddar biscuit with a slather of Tabasco-pepper-mash jam.

## The Eclectic Pathway - by Christopher Koetke



Honey Butter Fried Chicken in Chicago offers fried chicken topped with smoked paprika and served with housemade honey butter.

An eclectic fried chicken build is not global, nor is it purely Southern. It is a mash-up of traditions, pulling from regional pantries as well as exotic ones, puzzling them together in creative ways. Fuku's fried chicken sandwich is an example. So is Honey Butter Fried Chicken in Chicago.

A pioneer in this new wave of fried chicken, it butchers its birds in-house, sourcing them from a farm in Indiana, double battering in buttermilk, and featuring mostly boneless pieces. The chicken is fried until crispy, then topped with smoked paprika salt.

The signature move is genius: Each order is served with a housemade honey butter, encouraging diners to slather the butter on the bird.

*“With the rise of ‘better QSR’ concepts over the past decade focusing largely on burgers, fried chicken is the next comfort-food favorite to be swept up in our food renaissance. Trendy new concepts focused around fried chicken as a flagship item differentiate with signature touches, and affordable price points draw in Millennials and families alike. As ‘homemade’ becomes a new definition of quality, operators have the opportunity to draw from their own history with a great family recipe or culinary tradition.” - Sharon Olson*

The Crack Shack serves its fried chicken in five- to 10-piece portions with housemade sauces like harissa chimichurri and kimchi barbecue. For the sandwich, the fried chicken is tucked neatly into a house-baked English muffin.

At Birds & Bubbles in New York, the brunch menu sports the Chicken & Egg Biscuit with fried chicken, deviled egg sauce and dill pickle. It also offers Birdies in a Blanket, waffle-batter fried chicken with smoked cinnamon sugar.

Michael Kornick, executive chef and partner with DMK Restaurants in Chicago, recently opened a fast-food joint called Arlen’s Chicken in Evanston, Ill., which features eclectic fried chicken. Diners, mostly college students from nearby Northwestern University, can order a bucket of small pieces of fried chicken with either tots or crispy biscuits. The chicken is drizzled with a choice of three sauces: honey butter, Sriracha honey or Oh So Hot (Scotch bonnet, ghost pepper, red finger chiles, cider vinegar, garlic, black pepper). The sandwich version combines a toasted housemade biscuit, cheddar cheese, fried chicken thigh, sauce and bread-and-butter pickles.

“We’re trying to make a craveable dish where all of the elements are good enough to eat on their own,” says Kornick. That attention to detail is the key to unlocking the success behind this trend. “It’s all about complexity of flavor and texture,” he says. His brine sees black pepper, white pepper, cayenne, salt, sugar, vinegar. His coating includes fine salt, white pepper, black pepper and a supplied batter.

Kornick surveyed his target audience of college students before opening. Interestingly, those surveyed had two must-haves: milkshakes, and a fried chicken meal under \$10—he delivers on both of those requests.

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## **Embrace the Craveability**

by Dave Woolley

Exciting flavors in the coating are a key component of this trend, not to mention wheat-based and rice-based flours on the horizon. Also, the oil the chicken is fried in is becoming a bigger topic.

But perhaps the most important part of this trend is craveability. I live very close to an old-school, large-capacity fried-chicken restaurant, and it takes every fiber of my being not to eat there once a week—this chicken is done really well. If you remotely like fried chicken, you literally crave it on occasion—and sometimes more than occasionally. The umami factor just for everyday fried chicken is 10 on the Richter scale, and when you start to elevate it through a chef’s lens, it hits critical mass.

## **The Asian Connection**



Buttermilk Chicken Sliders at Dallas-based Twin Peaks include jalapeño gravy and bacon.

Of course, the United States isn't the only country with a tradition of fried chicken. The first foreign transplant to make waves here is the new "KFC"—Korean fried chicken. Fried twice, it's insanely crispy with a crackle-thin crust, then made even more craveable with a sweet-spicy-savory glaze. Crisp in Chicago features Korean fried chicken, pressure-fried then glazed in one of four sauces, including the Seoul Sassy, a non-spicy sauce made with ginger, soy, garlic and proprietary spices. The chicken is then topped with green onion. At San Francisco's Namu Gaji, the "KFC Style" Chicken Sando stars chicken thigh, tare (a Japanese thickened soy sauce), spicy slaw, pickled daikon, pan de mie bun and dashi gravy.

*"Chefs and operators know that serving fried chicken is a great way to turn a profit, satisfy the customer and build their brand. But how do you differentiate? By using the classical preparation and spicing of global cultures: Asian spices with a panko coating or jerk-seasoned flour are just two easy ways to demonstrate the flexibility of this amazing platform. We've only reached the ground floor of where fried chicken will be in years to come."*

- Mike Buonomato

As part of this wave, we'll begin to see more innovation around Japan's popular breaded chicken katsu. At Wichit in Boston, the Chicken Katsu Sandwich boasts a tempura-crust cutlet with housemade tonkatsu sauce (Japanese-style barbecue sauce).

Also in Boston, Fómami serves its panko-breaded chicken breast on shao bing, a flaky Chinese flatbread, along with cabbage, tomatoes and katsu sauce.

The growing popularity of Asian fried chicken here makes perfect sense. "The universality of fried chicken is tried and true," says Louis Maskin, strategist at The Culinary Edge. "Very few menu items are synonymous with both Southern and Korean fare, and this mix of familiarity and approachability has established a playground for creative chefs to have some fun with this classic dish."

Edward Lee knows fried chicken. On PBS' "Mind of a Chef," he extols the simple glory of indulging in it. Known for 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Ky., Lee has recently opened Succotash in National Harbor, Md. Gochujang Fried Chicken with Blue Cheese and Nori Chips is on the menu. Featuring only dark meat, he brines it in soy sauce, vinegar, chiles, bay leaf and Asian spices, gives it a simple buttermilk dredge and cooks it in a pressure fryer. Lee then salts the chicken and tosses it in a sauce of gochujang, honey, fish sauce, yellow mustard, rice vinegar and soy sauce. He crumbles blue cheese over it, along with nori chips and in-house pickles. "With gochujang, you get umami first, chile second," says Lee. "It's savory and addictive." He adds the blue cheese in part for a visual effect. "It looks like Buffalo chicken wings," he says.

At lunch, Lee's Fried Chicken Sandwich stars boned-out thighs on a brioche bun with pimento cheese, rémoulade and Jezebel sauce, a Southern compote made with pineapple, spicy mustard, horseradish and apple jelly.

“It’s an amazing thing that high food and low food used to be so separate,” says Lee. “They’re not anymore. Lines are blurred and customer expectations are higher. Whether it’s Fuku or Shake Shack, consumers are seeing that these restaurants have a culinary point of view. They appreciate that and seek it when they eat out. There hasn’t been a lot of innovation around fried chicken—it’s a long time coming.”

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## **The Perfect Piece**

by T.J. Delle Donne

I cannot think of a more perfect food experience than a perfectly marinated, brined or buttermilk-bathed, crispy piece of fried chicken. It’s our country’s grass-roots cuisine, and it’s much like many other cultural or ethnic foods that are getting serious attention from the chef world: The perfect pork bun, the flawless ramen, the textbook bulgogi and the faultless fried chicken—not bad company to be in.

We’re paying attention to this culinary classic because chefs today focus significantly on what people really like to eat—and how they can make that experience mind-blowing. Fried chicken seems pretty simple, but there are many opportunities to make it unique. There’s the marinade: Is it buttermilk and hot sauce? Is it pickle juice or a housemade brine? The coating: Is it seasoned all-purpose flour, rice flour or an alternative starch—or is it a batter? How many times is it coated?

The oil: Is it peanut oil, vegetable oil or chicken fat?

The opportunities to bring this simple delicacy to the next phase are boundless.