

Chef Dave Cruz's Ad Hoc Buttermilk Fried Chicken

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients:

Two 2 1/2- to 3-pound chickens (see Note on Chicken Size)

Chicken Brine (see below), cold

For Dredging and Frying

Peanut or canola oil for deep-frying

1 quart buttermilk

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Coating

6 cups all-purpose flour

1/4 cup garlic powder

1/4 cup onion powder

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon paprika

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon cayenne

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Ground fleur de sel or fine sea salt

Rosemary and thyme sprigs for garnish

Cut each chicken into 10 pieces: 2 legs, 2 thighs, 4 breast quarters, and 2 wings (see pages 18–19). Pour the brine into a container large enough to hold the chicken pieces, add in the chicken, and refrigerate for 12 hours (no longer, or the chicken may become too salty).

Remove the chicken from the brine (discard the brine) and rinse under cold water, removing any herbs or spices sticking to the skin. Pat dry with paper towels or let air-dry. Let rest at room temperature for 1 1/2 hours, or until it comes to room temperature.

If you have two large pots (about 6 inches deep) and a lot of oil, you can cook the dark and white meat at the same time; if not, cook the dark meat first, then turn up the heat and cook the white meat. No matter what size pot you have, the oil should not come more than one-third of the way up the sides of the pot. Fill the pot with at least 2 inches of peanut oil and heat to 320°F. Set a cooling rack over a baking sheet. Line a second baking sheet with parchment paper.

Meanwhile, combine all the coating ingredients in a large bowl. Transfer half the coating to a second large bowl. Pour the buttermilk into a third bowl and season with salt and pepper. Set up a dipping station: the chicken pieces, one bowl of coating, the bowl of buttermilk, the second bowl of coating, and the parchment-lined baking sheet.

Just before frying, dip the chicken thighs into the first bowl of coating, turning to coat and patting off the excess; dip them into the buttermilk, allowing the excess to run back into the bowl; then dip them into the second bowl of coating. Transfer to the parchment-lined pan.

Carefully lower the thighs into the hot oil. Adjust the heat as necessary to return the oil to the proper temperature. Fry for 2 minutes, then carefully move the chicken pieces around in the oil and continue to fry, monitoring the oil temperature and turning the pieces as necessary for even cooking, for 11 to 12 minutes, until the chicken is a deep golden brown, cooked through, and very crisp. Meanwhile, coat the chicken drumsticks and transfer to the parchment-lined baking sheet.

Transfer the cooked thighs to the cooling rack skin-side-up and let rest while you fry the remaining chicken. (Putting the pieces skin-side-up will allow excess fat to drain, whereas leaving them skin-side-down could trap some of the fat.) Make sure that the oil is at the correct temperature and cook the chicken drumsticks. When the drumsticks are done, lean them meat-side-up against the thighs to drain, then sprinkle the chicken with fine sea salt.

Turn up the heat and heat the oil to 340°F. Meanwhile, coat the chicken breasts and wings. Carefully lower the chicken breasts into the hot oil and fry for 7 minutes, or until golden brown, cooked through, and crisp. Transfer to the rack, sprinkle with salt, and turn skin side up. Cook the wings for 6 minutes, or until golden brown and cooked through. Transfer the wings to the rack and turn off the heat.

Arrange the chicken on a serving platter. Add the herb sprigs to the oil (which will still be hot) and let them cook and crisp for a few seconds, then arrange them over the chicken.

*Note on Chicken Size: You may need to go to a farmers' market to get these small chickens. Grocery store chickens often run 3 to 4 pounds. They can, of course, be used in this recipe but if chickens in the 2 1/2- to 3-pound range are available to you, they're worth seeking out. They're a little easier to cook properly at the temperatures we recommend here and, most important, pieces this size result in the optimal meat-to-crust proportion, which is such an important part of the pleasure of fried chicken.

*Note: We let the chicken rest for 7 to 10 minutes after it comes out of the fryer so that it has a chance to cool down. If the chicken has rested for longer than 10 minutes, put the tray of chicken in a 400°F oven for a minute or two to ensure that the crust is crisp, and the chicken is hot.

Chicken Brine

Makes 2 gallons

5 lemons, halved
24 bay leaves
1 bunch (4 oz) flat-leaf parsley
1 bunch (1 oz) thyme
½ cup clover honey
1 head garlic, halved through the equator
¼ cup black peppercorns
2 cups (10 oz) kosher salt, preferably Diamond Crystal
2 gallons water

The key ingredient here is the lemon, which goes wonderfully with chicken, as do the herbs: bay leaf, parsley and thyme. This amount of brine will be enough for 10 pounds.

Combine all the ingredients in a large pot, cover and bring to a boil. Boil for 1 minute, stirring to dissolve the salt. Remove from the heat and cool completely, then chill before using. The brine can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.