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Is The Best Fried Chicken Steaming Hot Or Picnic Cold?

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posted by [David Leite and Renee Schettler](#) | photo by [Will](#)

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Is fried chicken best served steaming hot or picnic warm? Should the coating be crispy or crunchy? David and Renee offer their opinions. Feel free to chime (cluck?) in with your own.



She said:

When I was a kid, my mom and I would drive from our farm to town once a week to run errands. Our last stop before heading back home was always the store for a week's worth of groceries. Those weeks when we were running behind and it was late in the day, mom would relent and let us get a bucket of takeout **fried chicken** from the store's deli for supper.

Getting takeout these days may seem like no big whoop. Back then, though, it was a triumph. And a reprieve from the rotation of **casseroles** that routinely constituted dinner. Before my mom would even park the car in the lot of B &

H Groceries, barely able to contain myself, I'd cautiously ask her for fried chicken. When she'd say yes, I'd bounce with giddiness and impatience as the barely automated store doors slowly swung open and the aroma of fried chicken smacked me in the face. I'd rush straight to the deli counter and drum my fingers against the glass case where the fried chicken was kept hot by a big bright bulb. Bouncing up and down in my shoes, my laces double-knotted, I waited seemingly forever while the older lady behind the counter took her tongs as well as her grand old time packing a tub of macaroni salad for my mom before turning her attention to our box of chicken, me willing her through the glass to select those big, buxom pieces I'd already called dibs on in my head.

I held that box of fried chicken on my lap the entire eight-mile drive home, the heat from the flimsy origami-like box burning my thighs. But as the pain subsided and the chicken grew lukewarm, my happiness would turn to antsiness. And with each slow-moving semi-trailer that we got caught behind, my heart would sink lower and lower until it was level with the grease-splattered box in my lap, heavy with the knowing that we were taking too long. When we did finally make it home, before I was allowed to tuck into the chicken, Mom would insist that we first unpack the groceries and then wait for my brother to make his way in from doing chores. Sometimes, too, there was the interminable wait for my dad to get in from the fields. By then, the chicken skin had long ago turned saggy and greasy and the room-temperature meat had become tasteless and tough beneath its layer of congealed fat. And, like the last time and the time before that, I'd sigh and push the chicken around on my plate, disappointed and refusing to eat, even when I was given a stern talk about starving kids elsewhere in the world. *If only we'd driven faster*, I'd think.

I didn't know much of anything about food back then. Except I knew what I liked. And I knew that some things are meant to be consumed hot. Not lukewarm. Not cold. Hot. Straight-out-of-the-fryer hot. Some things you just know.

There were, on rare occasion, instances when my mom took me and my fried chicken to a park just a couple minutes from the grocery store deli

counter for a picnic. That very same chicken was otherworldly when consumed hot. Skin shattered at the slightest touch. Tender meat gilded with glistening beads of oil that winked seductively and that gave way from the bone with just the gentlest of tugs. I was deliriously content in those moments.

I'm not the only person who understands that fried chicken ought to be consumed pretty much straight from the fryer. Early in our courtship, a particular guy and I would camp on the beach on Maryland's Eastern Shore. It became our summertime ritual. Unlike many beachgoers, ours was bereft of slimy, tepid fried chicken from an ice-filled cooler. We did, however, partake of a fried chicken ritual of a different sort. Each Sunday on our way home, amid hours of bumper-to-bumper traffic along Route 50, we'd pull off into the parking lot of a tiny roadside joint just east of the Bay Bridge. Rather than settle for drive-thru and slink back into traffic a few car lengths behind where we'd been, we'd take our time to park, stand in the almost interminable line at the counter, and take a seat outside at one of the flimsy plastic tables, inhaling noxious exhaust fumes as we were inhaling hot fried chicken. It was perfect.

Had we taken that box of steaming fried chicken back to the truck, we'd have inevitably been distracted by fumbling for coins to pay the toll or being mindful of not getting the steering wheel slick with grease and distractedly consuming it lukewarm. Not for us. Fried chicken demands concentration. Respect. Both hands. And timeliness. This wasn't anything we ever had to discuss. Some things you just know. That chicken was hot and crisp and juicy and perfect. But it wouldn't be for long.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Renee". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping initial "R".

He said:

Renee, "inconceivable" is too mild an invective. And Dan Aykroyd's SNL catch phrase of "Jane, you ignorant —," while it still makes me giggle, is

unduly heavy-handed for such a wistful remembrance.

I guess all I can say is, “Really? *Really?*” Loveliness is eating straight-from-the-oil **fried chicken** so hot it can raise welts on pre-teen thighs? I think not.

“Every food has its temperature, and every temperature has its seasoning,” Julia Child once told me when I interviewed her years ago. Some foods are meant to be eaten hot and have to be seasoned with a judicious hand. Some foods are meant to be eaten cold and have to be more highly seasoned for flavors to come through. And, in true Goldilocks fashion, some food is meant to be eaten warm for the full thwack of flavor—and in my universe that includes chicken pot pies, pizza, and fried chicken.

Simply put, fried chicken that exhales a swirl of steam when the hood of crunchy skin is lifted hasn’t had time to kick back and chill. Literally. It needs the molasses voice of **Barry White** to slow things down and get it in the groove.

If food is, as they say, all kinds of sexy porn, then the consenting partners that make up fried chicken—the fry mix, the oil, the seasoning, and the bird—need time to be shockingly, wantonly sexually inappropriate. They need to grope, grab, hump, and exchange all kinds of fluids before they reach the height, the pinnacle—do I say it? Do I say it!? **DO I SAY IT!!?**—the climax of flavor. And *that* can only happen when the pieces have cooled down to warm, or even room temperature. That’s when the chicken, trying to cover its seared flesh in a coat of buttermilk, flour, salt, and black and cayenne peppers, is shamed by its sudden loss of propriety and becomes vulnerable. Only then can the subtle nuttiness of the fried coating, the pepper’s tingling heat, the almost-there buttermilk tang come through.

Any sooner, and all you have is a mouth full of hot.

And then, of course, you have the contention of coatings. There’s something just plain *wrong* (sorry, Renee) with a coating so crunchy that it shatters off the meat with the first bite. It’s meant to cling to the chicken until the last mouthful. And I’m sure some food historian can confirm that the true nature of fried chicken coating is thin, not thick and clumpy, (To borrow from **Mother**

Monster, it was born that way, baby.) A light dusting, much like a light spritz of perfume, is far more seductive than layers and layers of flour—or Liz Taylor’s White Diamonds.

I remember when Kentucky Fried Chicken came out with its extra-crispy recipe. I rushed to try it. (Yes, I eat there, too.) After a few mouthfuls, I tossed out my four-piece meal and returned to the siren’s call of the original recipe. The coating was crisp rather than crunchy and the chicken mercifully warm, not hot. So addicted am I to KFC’s original coating that early in our courtship, I’d ask The One to please get me more napkins. And as he trotted away, then filled with the glow of pleasing me, I would strip-mine his chicken of its skin. He returned to a smiling, grease-smearred partner and naked chicken. Nowadays when I ask him to get me more napkins, I’m instructed to get my own coupled with the barb, “You need the exercise.” Or if he indulges me, as he occasionally does, he takes his tray with him.

In closing, I call into evidence, Picnic Chicken from **Round Swamp Farm** in Bridgehampton, the chicken that haunts my reverie. These cold pieces of fetching poultry parts—with crisp not crunchy skin—are heaped into plastic containers, where they slowly warm to room temperature until we arrive at the eponymous spot. Sometimes it’s the beach; other times, the bay; and in times of inclement weather, our waterfront cottage—now, sadly, long gone. And all at once I, The One, our dearest friend Ellen K., and on one occasion our late friend **Deborah** and her husband John, simultaneously bite into the Barry White-ified bird, all of us moaning like, well, you know what.

That, kiddies, is how you do fried chicken.

**Weigh in here, my chickadees. Tell us:
Are you hot or lukewarm when it
comes to fried chicken?**

Leave your thoughts, opinions, and outrage in the comments below.

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About David Leite and Renee Schettler

David Leite and Renee Schettler worked together from 2010 to 2021 as publisher and editor-in-chief respectively of Leite's Culinaria. David received three James Beard Awards for his writing as well as for Leite's Culinaria. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Martha Stewart Living*, *Saveur*, *Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine*, and *Los Angeles Times* among others. Renee has spent the past 20 years as an editor and writer at national newspapers and magazines, including *The Washington Post* food section, *Real Simple*,

and *Martha Stewart Living*. Although good friends, they agree on very little when it comes to most things, including food. Go figure.

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COMMENTS

Pam Avoledo

Jun 04, 2020 at 8:22 pm

I'm on Renee's side. I like my food hot, in general. I remember eating cold fried chicken as a kid and disliking it. Room temperature is barely tolerable for me. It makes the food bland for me.

REPLY

Mikey

Jul 05, 2020 at 1:38 am

Until now, I probably did not know why I don't like the food cold. Reading that, absolutely – it just seems bland to me. Cold pizza – no thank you. Cold bake beans from a can – definitely, no!

Cold fried chicken – that is an oxymoron.

REPLY

David Leite

Jul 05, 2020 at 9:00 am

Mikey, one of the things I learned from Julia Child (on TV not in person, alas!) is that foods that are meant to be served cold should always be OVER seasoned so that the flavor comes through. It works!

REPLY

Renee Schettler

Jun 04, 2020 at 8:36 pm

Completely with you, Pam. (And not just because you said you sided with moi.) It's like food loses a dimension when you take the temperature out of the equation.

REPLY

Jackie

Mar 28, 2020 at 6:03 pm

After reading this, Felicia and I want to make fried chicken one night this week. Can't go out to get it. What is your best and easiest recipe? Hugs and kisses "Cissy." Stay safe.

REPLY

David Leite

Mar 29, 2020 at 9:48 am

Cissy, this is **our most popular recipe**. How does that look?

REPLY

Penny Wolf

Mar 28, 2020 at 9:12 am

I'm in on the warm to cold picnic chicken as well as crispy not crunchy. I choose my extra carbs in the desserts that follow. Maybe the real key is who fixes the bird. Because if Grandma were here to fix fried chicken I would down whatever she serves.

REPLY

David Leite

Mar 29, 2020 at 11:20 am

Penny, you are an uncannily sensible woman! But, I will agree that the cook has something to do with it. While my grandmother fried nary a

piece of chicken in her life, I'd happily eat your grandma's poulet—hot or cold.

REPLY

F. M. Prescott

Sep 15, 2014 at 3:40 pm

The last of the physical therapists has finished. The emergency room and hospital stay are history. The searing heat is now only a memory along with that just-fried pullet on my typing fingers and denuded lips and tongue (and a more than faint recollection of the essay that tempted me to eat the bird hot). I can say, categorically, that the severe burns, hospital care and therapy made me a warm-fried chicken lover, to the extent that I can get the aroma passed by olfactory nerves. Sorry it took so long to let you know....

I so wanted to wait anxiously at the stove-top and bounce up and down in my shoes as I worked the fresh chicken that I had cut into 8 pieces and dredged as suggested. I even double-knotted the laces on my tie shoes, which I bought exclusively for the occasion. In my mind I'd already called dibs on those big, buxom breast pieces. I knew what I liked. And I knew that some things are meant to be consumed hot. Not lukewarm. Not cold. Hot. Straight-out-of-the-fryer hot. It seemed intuitive. I couldn't understand why it wasn't blatantly obvious to everyone else. Some things you just know. My scars and medical bills scream at me still about the error of my judgment.

Finished, I removed a piece and beheld wantonly the skin that shattered at the slightest touch, released a puff of steam, and laid naked before me moist and tender meat gilded with glistening beads of oil that seemed to wink seductively at me; little did I know it was only a meretricious trick. Rather than being tough and slimy from sitting in a puddle of grease, the meat gave way from the bone with just the gentlest of tugs. That, to me, was the proximate cause of my third degree burns.

I had to overcome my fear. Stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic along Route 50 on one return from the therapist's, at a certain point just before the Bay Bridge, I'd pulled off into the parking lot of a tiny roadside joint. Rather than

avail myself of the drive-thru and slink back into traffic a few car lengths behind where I'd been, I got out of the truck, stood in the inevitable line, and took a seat outside at one of the flimsy plastic tables, inhaling exhaust fumes. That's when I knew that the trick was 'exhaust fumes.' Preferably before lead was removed from gasoline. Hot out-of-the-oil fried-chicken demands concentration. Respect. Both hands. Mental incapacity from inhaling for some indiscreet period lead fumes from the exhaust of a 1949 Chevrolet 3100 5 Window Custom Pickup idling in the parking lot. And timeliness. This wasn't anything I even had to discuss. I understood without saying a word. That way the chicken was a hot, crisp, moist, and perfect danger. But it wouldn't be for long. I did not inhale the truck-fumes. After a brief period of cooling off, it would be edible and no danger to some of my most frequently used body parts. Those parts tore into the fried chicken, slightly warmer than the ambient temperature of that perfect roadside juke joint. The refrigerator-cold coleslaw made the chicken taste warmer without burning; the root beer bottle was cold enough for the slight humidity gnomes to grab the bottle and slide down to the table top..

I remarried my love for fried chicken not long after. Some things you just know. We are well on the way to recovery.

REPLY

David Leite

Sep 19, 2014 at 11:24 am

I'm so sorry ot hear of your chicken situation. I'm glad you two are back together, but maybe keeping it a tepid relationship is best.

REPLY

Carol Singer

Jul 22, 2013 at 5:35 pm

I just spent the weekend in the Hamptons and was served the most delicious picnic chicken from the Round Swamp Farm. I love to cook and was wondering if you know the recipe for their chicken. It would be greatly

appreciated since I live in Westchester, New York, and it's not a op, skip, or jump to pick some up. I'll have to drive 3 hours. Thank you.

REPLY

David Leite

Jul 24, 2013 at 7:58 am

Carol, I'm very familiar with Round Swap Farm picnic chicken. We rented a house not far away for several summers and ate it prodigiously. I tried numerous times to wiggle the recipe out of them and was unsuccessful. At least for now, the recipe remains a secret. And understandably—considering how popular it is and how much they sell. Sorry!

REPLY

Renee Schettler

Jul 24, 2013 at 1:33 am

Carol, talk about a resounding endorsement of a fried chicken recipe! Let's ask David, shall we? David, have you, perchance, perfected a replica of this at home?

REPLY

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