



## ANSON MILLS

### Southern Fried Chicken with Buttermilk Gravy

#### Yield

4 to 6 main dish portions

#### Time

Eight hours for the salt water soak; 3 hours to simmer the stock for the gravy; overnight for the buttermilk soak; 45 minutes to flour and fry the chicken; and 15 minutes to make the gravy. This recipe must be prepared over the course of 2 days.

#### Fried Chicken School

- 1. A proper frying chicken is tiny.** Three pounds preferably, not larger than 3¼. The pieces will appear as if in miniature when you cut the chicken.
- 2. A whole chicken beats parts.** “Parts is parts,” Southerners like to say, but when it comes to a fryer, a whole chicken is fresher than parts and its proportions compatible. Plus, having the backbone, neck, and wings left over gives you material for a quick, flavorful pan-gravy base.
- 3. The quality of the chicken counts.** We hear older adults reminisce about the flavor of chicken from their childhood. There are now pastured chickens and Amish chickens and heritage chickens and small organic chickens, all of which taste like old-fashioned chicken. These chickens might not have pushed Purdue aside in your local supermarket, but they’re available. We are convinced that the flavor deficits of mass-produced cooped-up chickens account in part for the barrage of gratuitous ingredients thrown into fried chicken recipes on a regular basis.
- 4. Salt water seasons and purges.** The practice of soaking the chicken overnight in salt water appears across the board in Southern recipes. Not strong enough to be a brine, the solution does add a simple seasoning boost to the meat and seems to purge it as well. The chicken emerges from the salt water sparkling clean.
- 5. Buttermilk tenderizes the meat.** Southern recipes soak the chicken parts in buttermilk several hours or overnight after the salt water. The process is thought to tenderize the meat. Having *real* buttermilk helps, of course, but if you can’t find it, go with a low-salt organic buttermilk.
- 6. Plain seasoned flour is the best breading.** You know the Colonel’s 11 herbs and spices? Forget them. Cracker crumbs? Matzoh? Silly diversions. The beaten egg wash and the double breading? Forget that, too. You’ll be glad to be free of this burden—and the chicken will be, too.
- 7. Fat is for flavor.** Frying isn’t just about which fat can get the hottest without breaking down: it’s also about flavor. The lard, butter, and bacon combination we suggest is adopted straight from Edna Lewis (though she uses country ham), and makes an enormous difference in the flavor of the fried chicken.

**8.** *Southern fried chicken is pan-fried, not deep-fried.* This means the fat reaches just halfway up the sides of the chicken. It is astonishing how little fat you need to fry one 3-pound chicken.

**9.** *The skillet should be cast iron and roomy.* A straight-sided seasoned cast-iron or enamel-coated cast-iron skillet 11 or 12 inches in diameter will support a 3-pound chicken. The skillet should be 2- to 2 ½-inches deep. Don't crowd the pan. The chicken pieces don't like heavy contact with each other while they're frying. We acknowledge that one 3-pound chicken won't feed a crowd. Southern cooks often fry two chickens in two skillets simultaneously. Try this, if you're up for it.

**10.** *Frying chicken needs constant attention.* Frying chicken is a dance of undulating temperatures. Unless you are a seasoned pro, use a thermometer. The chicken goes into the skillet when the fat is between 360 and 365 degrees. After that, be prepared to raise the temperature to compensate for loss of heat and lower it again after it recovers, or the chicken will burn. Raise the heat again slightly when you turn the chicken to get it the temperature back up to speed, and lower it in the final stages of cooking. The temperature should hover around 350 degrees. The chicken is turned once and once only.

### **Cooking Remarks**

If you can't find a small, well-raised chicken locally, we recommend ordering one from D'Artagnan of New York City. Their chickens are organic, too.

For the saltwater soak, note that we call for kosher salt, rather than our customary fine sea salt. We prefer kosher salt for soaking or brining.

Unable to locate buttermilk (made from live cultures) at our local store, we grabbed a quart of Organic Valley Cultured Lowfat Buttermilk. It is supremely thick, making it a good medium for clutching the flour close to the chicken. We use it in our pan gravy as well for a little trace of tang.

Getting to the flour, you'll remember, we developed this fried chicken recipe to go with waffles and gravy. Since we had this fabulous flour lying around, one that combines pastry and rice flours—both exceptionally light for crisping, we took advantage of its proximity and used it to dredge the chicken. It worked beautifully, of course, but plain all-purpose flour will work just fine as well.

We've extolled the supreme baking qualities of leaf lard in our recipe for World Class Chicken Pot Pie. But it is magnificent for frying chicken, too. Lard carries temperature so beautifully that the knob of butter we throw in for flavor *will not burn!* We buy our lard by mail order from the upper Midwest at Prairie Pride Pork. It keeps beautifully for a year or so in the freezer.

The quality of smoke in the bacon has a profound impact on the final chicken flavor. Allan Benton's signature slow hickory-smoked country bacon, made in the Smoky Mountains near Madison, Tennessee, is favored by chefs from David Chang to Linton Hopkins. We adore the bacon Flying Pigs Farm too.

Now about the skillet. We *are* utterly smitten with Le Creuset's 3½ quart Signature Braiser, sold by Williams-Sonoma and other online merchants. It's about 11½ inches in diameter, its depth is perfect for frying, its sides are fairly straight, its heat conduction unparalleled, and its clean up a cinch. Its cost is another matter. Lodge makes outstanding seasoned cast iron cookware as well. Their straight-sided 12-inch skillet will get the job done for less than a quarter the price of the Le Creuset. It is available online at Amazon, in many hardware stores, and at Target as well.

### **Equipment Mise en Place**

For the salt water soak, you will need a large mixing bowl.

To cut the chicken, you will need a heavy chef's knife. A cleaver will also come in handy.

For the chicken stock, you will need a small flameproof roasting pan, a medium heavy-bottomed saucepan, a wooden spoon, a fine-mesh sieve, and a medium heatproof mixing bowl.

To prepare the frying fat, you will need a medium heavy-bottomed saucepan, a chinois or a fine-mesh strainer lined with cheesecloth, and a 2-cup glass measuring cup.

For the buttermilk soak, you will need an 8-inch square glass baking dish.

To fry the chicken, you will need 2 rimmed baking sheets and 2 wire racks; an 8-inch square glass baking dish; a heavy-bottomed 11- or 12-inch fairly straight-sided cast-iron or enamel-coated cast-iron skillet with a depth of about 2 inches, with a lid; an instant-read thermometer; and a sharp fork.

To make the gravy, you will need a wooden spoon, a whisk, and a fine-mesh strainer.

### **Ingredients**

#### *for the salt water soak*

2 tablespoons kosher salt

1 cup hot spring or filtered water, plus 4 cups cold spring or filtered water

1 whole 3-pound chicken

#### *for the chicken stock*

Vegetable oil spray

Reserved neck, gizzard, back, and wings from the cutting up the chicken

2 small onions, chopped

½ medium carrot, cut into rounds

1 small celery rib, cut into pieces

3 or 4 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced

6 cups spring or filtered water, plus more as needed

1 big sprig fresh thyme or 2 teaspoons dried thyme

Small handful of fresh flat-leaf parsley sprigs and stems

1 Turkish bay leaf

2 teaspoons whole black peppercorns

*for the frying fat*

8 ounces leaf lard  
2 ounces (4 tablespoons) unsalted European-style butter  
2 ounces high-quality thick-sliced bacon (about 3 slices)

*for the buttermilk soak*

1 tablespoon fine sea salt  
3 or 4 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced  
2 cups (16 ounces) low-fat buttermilk

*for frying the chicken*

8 ounces (about 1¾ cups) Anson Mills Thirteen Colony Rice Waffle Flour or all-purpose flour  
1½ teaspoons fine sea salt  
1¼ teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

*for the gravy*

1.25 ounces (¼ cup) all-purpose flour  
Reserved 2 cups chicken stock, hot  
1 Turkish bay leaf  
1 cup (8 ounces) whole milk, low-fat buttermilk, or a combination thereof  
Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
1 ounce (2 tablespoons) unsalted butter

**Directions**

- 1. Day one.** *Cut up and soak the chicken in salt water:* Place the salt in a large mixing bowl, add the hot water, and stir until the salt dissolves. Add the 4 cups cold water and stir. Adjust an oven rack to the lower-middle position and heat the oven to 425 degrees. If there is a bag in the chicken cavity, remove it. Spray a small flameproof roasting pan with vegetable oil. Set the chicken neck and the gizzard from the bag in the roasting pan. Discard the liver, or save it for your cat.
- 2.** Using a heavy chef's knife, cut the wing tips and wing mid sections from the chicken, and then remove each drumette from the breast at the first wing joint. Add all the wing pieces to the roasting pan. Separate each leg from the body at the joint, and then cut each leg into drumstick and thigh pieces. Place them in the salt water. Using a cleaver, if you have one, or the chef's knife, cut through the ribs on either side of the backbone to separate the backbone from the breast. Place the backbone in the roasting pan. Turn the breast skin side down and cut lengthwise through the breastbone to separate the breast into 2 evenly sized pieces. Cut each breast in half crosswise and add them to the bowl. Cover and refrigerate the chicken in the salt water and let soak for 8 to 10 hours.
- 3. Make the stock:** Meanwhile, roast the bones in the pan until golden, turning occasionally with tongs, 30 to 35 minutes. Toss the onions, carrot, celery, and garlic into the roasting pan with the bones and continue to roast until the vegetables take color, turning occasionally, about 20 minutes more.

**4.** Transfer the bones and vegetables to a heavy-bottomed medium saucepan. Place the roasting pan on a burner set on high heat and deglaze the pan with 1 cup of the water, stirring with a wooden spoon to scrape up the browned bits. Pour the deglazing liquid and the browned bits into the saucepan, scraping the pan clean. Add the thyme, parsley, bay, peppercorns, and remaining 5 cups water and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer gently, uncovered, until the stock is rich in flavor, 2½ to 3 hours, adjusting the heat and adding water in ½-cup increments as needed to keep the bones just barely submerged.

**5.** Strain the stock through a fine-mesh sieve into a medium heatproof mixing bowl. You should have about 2 cups (if you have more, pour the stock into a clean saucepan and simmer until it's reduced to 2 cups). Let cool slightly, and then refrigerate. When the fat has solidified on the surface, remove and discard it. Refrigerate the stock until ready to use.

**6. *Prepare the frying fat:*** Place the lard, butter, and bacon in a medium saucepan and render over medium-low heat until the bacon is crisp and brown and the water has evaporated from the butter, 15 to 20 minutes. Strain the fat through a chinois or a fine-mesh strainer lined with cheesecloth into a 2-cup glass measuring cup. There should be about 1½ cups of dark golden liquid fat. Set the fat aside and eat the bacon.

**7. *Drain the chicken and soak it in buttermilk:*** After the chicken has soaked in the salt water for 8 to 10 hours, drain off the water. Add the salt and garlic to an 8-inch square baking dish, pour in the buttermilk, and stir until the salt dissolves. Shake the chicken pieces dry over the sink and submerge them in a single layer in the buttermilk, turning the pieces to coat. Cover the dish with plastic wrap and refrigerate the chicken overnight.

**8. *Day two. Fry the chicken:*** Transfer the chicken from the buttermilk to a wire rack set over a rimmed baking sheet, picking off any garlic slices that cling to the chicken, and let drain. Turn the flour, salt, and pepper into a second 8-inch square baking dish and toss.

**9.** Transfer 1¼ cups of the frying fat to a heavy-bottomed 11- or 12-inch fairly straight-sided cast-iron or enamel-coated cast-iron skillet with a depth of about 2 inches. Line a second rimmed baking sheet with paper towels and set it aside. Bury the chicken piece by piece in the flour, carefully pressing flour into the skin. Gently dust off excess flour and set the chicken skin side up on a second wire rack. Allow the flour to dry on the chicken for 10 to 15 minutes.

**10.** When the flour coating is “set,” heat the fat over medium-low heat until it reaches a temperature of 360 to 365 degrees. Using your hands, lower the chicken pieces into the fat skin side down, beginning with dark-meat pieces. The fat should come about halfway up the sides of the chicken pieces; if needed, add more of the remaining fat. Partially cover the pan and increase the temperature to high to compensate for the heat loss. As the fat's temperature comes back up to 350 degrees, lower the heat again to prevent the chicken from burning. The fat should emit a cheerful snap and sputter. (Test the temperature of the fat from time to time with an instant-read thermometer, and make adjustments to keep it around 350 degrees.) Fry the chicken partially covered, without turning, for 10 to 12 minutes, peeking to see its color become deep

golden. Turn the chicken carefully with a sharp fork, raise the temperature slightly and fry the second sides uncovered. As the heat gains momentum, lower the temperature again. The second sides will fry more quickly, in about 8 minutes. Turn the chicken pieces but once. When they are done, the thickest part of the breast pieces will register about 160 degrees, and the thickest part of the thigh pieces will register about 175 degrees. Pull the pieces out of the fat with a sharp fork and drain them on the paper towel-lined baking sheet. (If you'd like to keep the chicken hot while you make the gravy, transfer the pieces to a clean wire rack set over a rimmed baking sheet and set the baking sheet in a warm oven.) Remove the skillet from the heat and pour or spoon off all but 2 tablespoons of the fat and drippings.

**11. *Make the gravy:*** Sprinkle the flour onto the hot drippings and stir with a wooden spoon to make a smooth paste, or roux. Replace the skillet over medium heat and cook the roux, stirring constantly, until it is molten and begins to color slightly, about 5 minutes. Whisk the hot stock into the roux in 3 additions. Add the bay leaf and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat, whisking constantly. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer gently for 5 minutes. Whisk in the milk or buttermilk and simmer 5 minutes more. Season with salt and pepper and whisk in the butter. Strain the gravy through a fine-mesh strainer into a warmed gravy boat.

**12.** Serve the fried chicken with the gravy and Yeasted Rice Waffles or mashed potatoes.