

NASHVILLE'S ORIGINAL HOT CHICKEN

My good friend and fine writer Pat Embry introduced me to the Nashville hot chicken deal long before it became an American phenomenon. He had co-authored a book called "Where The Locals Eat" and took me to Prince's in 2006.

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- Food is suddenly hot in Music City, a destination generally associated with twangy guitars and souped up stock cars. Last month, the Southern Foodway Alliance held its quarterly camp in Nashville, where members sampled hickory smoked barbecue and sipped Tennessee whiskey.

But the hottest restaurant in Nashville, hands down, is Prince's Hot Chicken Shack. Harold's Chicken Shack in Chicago was the king of hot chicken until I tried Prince's.

If you want it "hot" at Prince's, you order "medium." A pickle slice on the side calms the effect. You also avoid Coca-Cola or Mountain Dew. I quickly learned carbonation accents the heat. Pat Embry- whom I've known for years -- brought two glasses of backup water during our visit to Prince's. Then I got my own water.

Prince's is in a nondescript strip mall, four miles northeast of downtown. It is on a road checkered by places including Louie's Backfire Lounge and Infamous Pimps and Hos. Prince's only has five booths and they are from the original store, circa 1945. Dusties play on a radio behind the counter. Owner Andre Prince is carrying on the tradition that was started by her great uncle Thornton Prince. He invented the hot chicken recipe-- it's secret, of course -- but the stories that surround it are smoking.

"The hot chicken started out of revenge," Prince said over a plate of orange-tinted chicken with two slices of white bread. (The darker the skin, the greater the pepper seasoning.) "He was a womanizer. Everybody was crazy about my Uncle Thornton. The myth is that a girlfriend got angry and poured hot pepper over his chicken. He loved it and told his friends about it. Our family would do something like that -- out of spite."

There's clearly cayenne deployed in the chicken. The chicken comes from Nashville Restaurant Supply and is never barbecued. We ate a quarter breast (\$4.35) and leg (\$3.25). Another of Prince's secrets are the eight cast-iron skillets she deploys on two 50-year-old gas stoves. It takes at least a half-hour to skillet-fry chicken to perfection. However, the stoves were broken during last month's visit to Prince's. "It's hard to get somebody to fix those gas stoves," Prince said. "Parts are obsolete. We're using mostly deep fry. People still wait 30 minutes to an hour for chicken. A lot of the older customers still want theirs slow fried." And she said it so *sloooooow*.

Prince looked around the crowded shack. Women were smiling. Men were fading. "More women eat the chicken extra hot than men," she said. "I don't know what it is about women and hot food. They should do a study on that. They maintain. Men kind of drop out." Some pregnant women, overdue, have visited Prince's to induce labor.

The SFA visited Prince's during its camp. Prince's was honored with the SFA's Guardian of the Tradition award. "The taste of the cayenne-grease stained white bread underneath the chicken is being tested as the possible sixth taste, one level beyond umami, and just shy of a peyote-induced vision conquest," said the SFA report. That's hot.

Prince's is also serious about customers not touching any part of their body until they have washed their hands -- after holding the hot chicken. "One man rubbed his eye while eating," Prince said. "And he tore through the restaurant trying to get to the restroom. He was in pain." Prince suggested chasing the chicken

down with a slice of Southern chess pie (butter, sugar, corn meal).

In 1995, the New Jersey band Yo La Tengo paid tribute to Prince's by singing "Flying Lesson (Hot Chicken #1)" on their album "Electr-O-Pura." They later sang "Return to Hot Chicken." The restaurant is a subject of a SFA documentary by Joe York. Little Richard has stopped by Prince's, as has country singer Lorrie Morgan. Her father George Morgan was a Grand Ole Opry star and a connoisseur of spicy chicken. Lorrie and her latest husband Sammy Kershaw opened their own Hotchicken.com restaurant, but it recently went belly up. Maybe its because it had a stupid name like Hotchicken.com.

Mayor Bill Purcell is a regular at Prince's. "He never has it mild," Prince said. "I don't know how he can eat it and go right back to work. Usually when people eat it hot, I see them in the small room the rest of the day. He has an iron stomach. He comes in and answers the phone and takes orders."

"I was born in Philadelphia and believe that hot chicken is to Nashville as cheesecakes are to Philadelphia," Purcell said via e-mail. "There is hotter food, but this is the hottest I have ever enjoyed. I eat hot chicken because it is Prince's Hot Chicken Shack. If you want something different, you should go to a medium chicken shack, though they do not exist because nobody wants that."

My brother and his wife have lived in Nashville since 1993. I've heard them complain how eclectic restaurants don't last in Nashville. I've heard country singer Steve Earle complain how there are no good Mexican restaurants in Nashville.

Embry has lived in Nashville since 1979. He said, "I discovered that restaurants were the most integrated part of society in Nashville. During the 1960s, Nashville never got much attention during the Civil Rights movement because heads didn't get knocked. People were taking Dr. King's passive form of protest to its tenth degree. Lunchrooms were integrated, places like Prince's and Swett's [a soul food meat and three], down the road. You'll see all walks of life."

Prince's has been at its present location since 1988. Uncle Thornton opened the establishment as a take-out shack in 1945 in north Nashville near Tennessee State University -- where Oprah Winfrey and track legend Wilma Rudolph are alumni. "I'd like to be closer to downtown," Prince said. "But this is good, because I close when I get ready. If you're on a main drag, you can't do that. I feel like this is a mom-and-pop place. I like it small."

Prince, who described her age as "sixty something," grew up in north Nashville. She doesn't recall hanging around the shack as much as her father Bruce Prince bringing home the hot chicken for his wife, Wilhelmina, and their three children. "We always ate it on Sunday morning," she recalled. "It would be on the stove when we got up to go to Sunday school. That's when I know chicken is right. I have to have it sit overnight on the stove. That's the taste I grew up with. I don't like it when it's straight out of the skillet."

Uncle Thornton passed his business on to his brother Will and sister-in-law Maude Prince. In 1980 Wilhelmina asked her daughter to keep the restaurant alive, although she never worked at the shack. Prince was employed at the Metro Courthouse in Nashville.

"She was on her death bed," Prince said. "I was divorced and had two children to support. My mother and father were helping me pay my car notes. They didn't think I could make it on my salary at the courthouse. She suggested I go into the business, but I had no idea what it involved. This did help me get my girls through high school and college. My cup is running over. What can I say?" Andre Prince reached for a cup of water, so cool and true.

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