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The four-piece fried chicken meal at Mini Hut

WORTH A TRIP

**FRIED CHICKEN**

Mini Hut, 6659 W. Archer Ave. 773-586-2115

By **Michael Nagrant** | FOR REDEYE  
 I've eaten a lot of fried chicken in Chicago. I love Au Cheval's General Jane's fried chicken, Crisp's Seoul Sassy fried chicken and Honey Butter Fried Chicken's offerings. Harold's wings "fried hard" and doused in hot sauce have a special place in my lard-coated heart. Most recently, though, one stands above them all. That spot, Mini Hut in Garfield Ridge, serves my favorite fried chicken in Chicago.

Owner Don Engel attributes part of his flavor advantage to using fresh chickens "never wrapped in plastic" that he has delivered every other day. On average, Engel cooks more than 2,500 pieces of that chicken weekly. The pieces are marinated overnight in a salt and garlic marinade and fried to order in a butter-flavored, seasoned flour. Because it's made fresh, even a reasonable two-piece order (such as the \$5.25 chicken boat, which comes with a soft Parker House-style bread roll and fantastic, piping-hot crinkle-cut french fries) takes 20 to 25 minutes to cook. For that wait, you are awarded a cracklin' golden-crust piece of poultry speckled with salt and pepper that's juicy to the bone. These are not brontosaurus-sized super-crispy KFC or Popeye's cuts. The pieces at Mini Hut are modest, a buttery and slightly crispier version of the kind of fried chicken you might have found served with a Korbel brandy old fashioned at a backwoods Wisconsin supper club.

The chicken is so marvelous that I suspect if some restaurant wunderkind sold it from a kiosk in River North called Chuck or something equally cutesy, they'd make a

fortune. Or maybe not. Last year, someone bought the right to franchise 10 locations of Mini Hut from Engel, but the first franchised location at 86th Street and Kedzie Avenue closed. "They were screwing it up by cooking the chicken in advance and holding it in warming ovens, and ignoring the way I did things," Engel said.

There's certainly an old-school charm the current Mini Hut possesses that would be hard to replicate. The low-ceilinged hideaway is filled with plastic yellow bench seats, a framed collage of horse-racing articles and an '80s-style hi-fi set-up including a record player that looks like it has been plugged in for a decade. It's kind of like a cross between a Waffle Hut and nuclear fallout shelter. (P.S. Though the address is on Archer Avenue, the entrance is actually on the side street, Normandy Avenue.)

Amidst this character, even Engel's had business challenges, from which he's bounced back admirably. He operated Mini Hut for 26 years a couple of blocks away from the current Archer location until he lost his lease. He went to work for Connie's Pizza for four years after that before reopening in 1998. "While I worked at Connie's, everyone kept asking me when I was going to reopen. When I found this new place, I took out an ad in the local newspaper a week before opening and wondered if anyone would show up," he said. "They mobbed me. Lines were out the door and I almost ran out of chicken."

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