

eat & drink



The outside eating area on the patio of Nando's Peri-Peri

Bird is the word

Chicago's first location of the South African chain delivers seriously addictive chicken

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There's something about chicken franchises that inspire cult fanaticism. When Chick-fil-A opened in Chicago, lines were wrapped around the block. Flights from Mexico to the United States were once known to smell of Pollo Campero because so many folks ferried back takeout orders on their way home. Nando's Peri-Peri, a flame-broiled chicken chain founded in 1987 in a working-class suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa, by two friends, Fernando Duarte and Robbie Brozin, inspires similar devotion. Jay Z was rumored to have included a request for Nando's on his tour rider when he played the Brit Awards. Prince Harry was seen making a getaway with chicken at the Fulham location in the UK. Harry Styles from One Direction apparently prepared one Valentine's Day at the Leeds location. It must be good, right? But, you know cults aren't always good things, after all—Waco, Jim Jones, “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt” and all that. I stopped in to the first Chicago location in the West Loop (one is planned to open in Lincoln Park and one in Lakeview this summer) last week to see whether Nando's was a club worth joining.

The scene

I'm so not this guy, but the best adjective I can use to describe this location of Nando's is *bangin'*. Portuguese rhythms thrummed over the house speakers, the ordering line was twenty deep and the smell of flame-roasted chicken hung in the air. The dining room—outfitted with a rainbow-colored assortment of South African pottery, a forest of reclaimed honey-colored wood tables, flooring and wall panels reclaimed from a defunct Ohio crayon factory and mod gray chairs—was cheerful and original. The back patio was lined with a Pinterest-worthy spread of succulent-studded planters and chain-link fencing woven with multi-colored streamers,

making the whole place feel like a barbecue- and beer-fueled garden party that I wanted to hang out at all summer long. Though Nando's has more than 1,000 locations worldwide, it truly doesn't feel like a chain. “No two Nando's look the same,” said Sepanta Bagherpour, director of marketing for Nando's Peri-Peri USA. “It's not a ‘concept.’ We're a restaurant founded in a working class suburb. The first location was a mom-and-pop joint. We never tried to fill a gap in the market or go after the spicy chicken dollar. We just try to create great food,” he added.

The meat

The Chicago location's menu is almost exactly the same served worldwide, save for a few variations, including the Nandoca's choice (\$11.75), featuring butterflied peri-peri chicken breast topped with coleslaw sandwiched between two pieces of garlic bread. Spanning everything from the famous chicken to salads to wraps to chicken livers, the selection is pretty vast. Jay Z might have 99 problems, but the chicken ain't one; Nando's famous peri-peri chicken is a traditional Portuguese poultry preparation that means the chicken is flame-roasted and marinated

HEATING UP
Nando's Peri-Peri
953 W. Randolph St.
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for 24 hours in African birdseye chili, aka *piri-piri*, the Swahili word for “pepper pepper.” The chain spells the name peri-peri, which is an African language adaptation of the Portuguese spelling. All the cuts of the famous peri-peri chicken preparation I tried were good, but my favorite (and the juiciest cuts) were the leg and thigh (\$7.25 with one side). Though it's flame-roasted with a gas fire, the chicken had a deep smoky essence that reminded me of the very best charcoal-roasted birds. And the skin! Crisp, mahogany and flecked with pepper, I'd eat a plate of it alone. You can order the chicken slathered in a range of sauces, from mild to extra hot, and though it's not on the menu, Bagherpour said you can order extra-extra-hot if you're a chili-head. I love extra-hot—the spice was exhilarating but not tastebud-damaging, but if you're timid about spice, I'd still start with the medium. If you're not sure, order it plain and grab a bunch of the sauces from the free

Chicken with peas and rice



hot sauce bar to experiment and doctor as you choose. Stay away from the mango-lime and lemon herb sauces; while I appreciated their brightness, they had a harsh backnote that reminded me of the pasteurized bottled citrus juice you find in the grocery store. There's also a decent ribeye sandwich (\$11.75 with one side) topped with roasted red peppers, pickled red onion, arugula served on a toasted Portuguese roll (a flatter, less crusty take on the baguette). It had a nice mix of tangy, spicy and rich flavor, but the beef was a little chewy and cooked well, though I'd ordered it medium-rare.

The sides

My favorite side dish was the "Macho" peas (\$11.75), a Portuguese riff on the UK's popular mushy peas. The rustic mash of fresh, verdant whole peas tossed with cooling mint, searing chili and bright parsley was refreshing. The creamy red skin mashed potatoes (\$2.75) bubbling with garlic butter tasted more like mom's rustic mashed potatoes than franchise food. Crunchy cucumber curlicues and pink slivers of pickled onion glistened with a tangy poppy seed vinaigrette (\$3.75). The only side I tried that I didn't love was the fries (\$2.75), quarter-inch-thick golden planks sprinkled with peri-peri chili powder that were limp on arrival.

The drinks

There's a wide selection of Portuguese and South African red and white wine offered by the glass, as well as pitchers of sangria. I dug the Gatao vinho verde, a crisp, fruity white that cut nicely through the spicy flavors (\$5.25 per glass). If you need a second round,

just order from one of the servers who are milling about the dining room.

The sweets

Though I didn't indulge, those who grew up eating at Ponderosa or Sizzler will have nostalgic flashbacks if they help themselves to the bottomless vanilla frozen yogurt (\$2.95) available from the self-serve machine located in the dining room. I settled instead for a slice of dulce de leche cheesecake (\$6.25). It was rich and dense with some satisfying caramel notes, but really tasted only about 5 percent better than something I'd pick up at Costco.

The service

You order your food at the counter and then get an assigned table number. Within about five to ten minutes, your order is ferried to your table in the dining room. The staff was friendly and responsive, asking multiple times if we needed anything else, and they bussed and cleaned surrounding tables with the speed of a Formula One pit crew.

Bottom line

Though the Nando's empire has more than 1,000 locations, it serves up rustic home-made-tasting side dishes and fiery succulent flame-roasted birds that taste much more like the rustic honey offerings from mom-and-pop roasted chicken spots in Chicago such as D'Canдела or La Brasa Roja. Just stay away from the citrus sauces and order your bird spicy.

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