

eat & drink

Pecan pie (clockwise from top), fried pickles, chicken, greens and baked beans
KRISTEN NORMAN
PHOTOS FOR REDEYE



Memphis favorite ups Chicago's chicken game

RATINGS KEY **** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL
**** PROCEED WITH CAUTION **** GIVE IT SOME TIME
**** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT **** OFF TO A GOOD START
**** HEATING UP **** ALREADY HOT



By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Some things don't get better after the first time. Despite the pornification of food, eating isn't always like having sex. The first sip of an ice-cold Miller High Life after a long workout or the burst of flavor in my mouth the first time I tried the Black Truffle Explosion at Alinea—those are some tasty first moments I will always relish. After all, the second beer is usually a chore, and while that Alinea dish is still tasty, the surprise and delight I experienced the first time can never be replicated.

I approached a visit to the new Chicago location of Gus's World Famous Fried Chicken with these ideas in mind because for the past six years, if you asked me where the best fried chicken in the universe was served, I'd have told you Gus's in Memphis, Tenn. In 2009, I took a Southern road trip, and in less than a week I'd eaten fried chicken at meccas such as Prince's Hot Chicken Shack in Nashville, Tenn., Willie Mae's Scotch House and Dooky Chase's Restaurant in New Orleans and a bunch of other less heralded spots in Alabama and Mississippi. But Gus's was something else: a sheath of shattering, crispy, slightly spicy skin enrobing flesh that burst with juice all the way to the bone. After my first bite, I doubled our table's order, not to have leftovers, but to gorge myself with a chicken nirvana I knew I would never achieve once I returned to Chicago.

Every year after that trip, I threatened to hop the Megabus downtown just to take a day trip to Memphis and bring Gus's chicken to Chicago. Zach Goodman, managing partner of Gus's Chicago location, had a similar experience. "I wasn't really into fried chicken, but my boss made me eat it when we were on a business trip in Memphis. I was blown away," he said. "I'd always threaten to pay to have all my friends go down there to eat, and I eventually bought like 100 pieces of Gus's fried chicken for a bachelor party. I knew I had to bring it here." And so he did. Still I wondered: Would the Chicago version

live up to the religious conversion I had in Memphis, or would I find myself cursing the chicken like the warm dregs of a second cup of Old Style on a hot summer day during a Cubs loss at Wrigley?

The scene

With its tile-lined walls, cement floors and tiny, low-lit dining room, the Memphis location of Gus's felt like dining at the bottom of a swimming pool. The Chicago location is spacious and features a huge swanky bar, a towering wall lined with reclaimed wood and a handful of neon signs. Though the fare in Chicago is still served on disposable plates and the tables boast the same checkered cloths, the Fulton Market location is like the luxurious Trump-like cousin to the much more rustic downtown Memphis version of Gus's.

Service

I waited an hour in Memphis for a table and at least 45 minutes for my chicken. "This is not fast food. It might feel like it, but we fry the chicken to order," Goodman said. "It takes time." That being said, in Chicago, I had drinks and appetizers on the table within five minutes of sitting down and chicken within 15. The servers refilled my sweet, slightly bitter and eminently refreshing house-brewed sweet tea with the speed of an Indy 500 pit crew.



Zach Goodman

The food

The fried pickles (\$6.95) in Chicago were a mirror of the ones I ate in Memphis. Searing hot in crispy wrappers flecked with dill, these—and the tempura-battered pickles at Lillie's Q (a totally different style)—are the best fried cukes in Chicago, hands down. Fair warning: Be resolute in your bite, for if you don't cut through the entire pickle with your teeth, you will find that the rest of the pickle will slip its fried crust and burn the roof of your mouth, your lips and maybe part of your face. This might have happened to me in Memphis. I'm no longer a sucker, and I avoided a similar fate here in Chicago.

The various sides on offer (\$2-\$9.75 depending on size), however, didn't fare as well. An order of mac 'n' cheese was under-salted, and the mushy noodles were turgid with moisture and looked like Kraft mac on performance-enhancing drugs. The potato salad was sweet and pungent with a nice mustard perfume but also lacked salt. Baked beans were firm but doused in a syrupy, smoky gravy reminiscent of grocery store bottled barbecue sauce. Winners in the category included a crunchy, fresh slaw and heavenly greens that were steeped in a righteous liquor that tasted faintly of mulled wine. I couldn't confirm this (see the bit about recipe security below), but I think I detected a hint of allspice.

But you don't come to Gus's for the sides. So about that chicken (\$3.05 per thigh, leg or wing and \$4.20 per breast). The skin was shattery like I remembered and a touch spicier than the order I had in Memphis. The interior was denser and a little less seasoned than the birds I remembered. This was truer for the white pieces than the dark, which were almost perfect. "People order a lot of breasts, and those can be dry," Goodman

said. "They're juicy here." He's right. My breast meat was certainly juicier than what I'd find at some of the better fried chicken places in town, but there were a few touches of dryness in some of the bites. I wish I could figure out why my Chicago experience was different from the one I had in Memphis, but it might be easier to sneak-hug President Obama than to pry a single detail on chicken preparation from Gus's staff.

But these observations are quibbles, and I might even admit a failure of memory or an indulgence in nostalgia for my time in Memphis. Ultimately, Gus's Chicago location is serving some of the best fried birds in the city. However, what is clear is that Gus's has stiff competition from Au Cheval, Smalls or Mini Hut near Midway airport. I plan on returning to Gus's often, but there are a handful of killer fried chicken alternatives in Chicago that didn't exist five years ago.

Dessert

Depending on your appetite, there will also be pie: pecan, sweet potato, coconut and chess (\$3.25 a slice). The chocolate chess filling is delightfully redolent with bittersweet cocoa notes, and the pecan has a satisfying sugary and crunchy finish. Where the pies slightly disappoint is in their fairly leaden crusts. Hoosier Mama Pie Co. and their angelic buttery pastry crusts have spoiled me in this regard.

Bottom line

Gus's is serving some fairly priced juicy fried chicken that competes with the best spots in town. The sides and pies could use some work, but for the chicken and fried pickles alone, you should consider becoming a regular.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.
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MINI-REVIEW
Gus's World
Famous Fried
Chicken

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☆☆☆☆
Off to a
good start