

eat & drink



X-Hot dark meat chicken with collard greens, elote and a bottle of Cheerwine. HILARY HIGGINS PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

SOME LIKE IT *hot* NASHVILLE HOT CHICKEN LANDS IN LAKEVIEW

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

There aren't too many iconic foods that have been invented as a form of revenge. But according to legend, that's exactly how Nashville hot chicken came to be. As the story goes, a guy named Thornton Prince returned home to his girlfriend after a long night of cheating. She repaid the favor by drenching his fried chicken in spice, but the scheme backfired when Prince loved the chicken so much he asked for the recipe and opened a restaurant that specialized in the dish. His great-niece Andre Prince Jeffries eventually took over the Nashville spot, which is now known as Prince's Hot Chicken Shack.

Jared Leonard, owner of Rub's Backcountry Smokehouse in Rogers Park, also fell in love with the stuff and decided to bring Nashville hot chicken to Chicago. He teamed up with chef de cuisine Jonathan

Zaragoza (Birrieria Zaragoza, Masa Azul, Pearl's Southern Comfort) and the two went on a hot-chicken pilgrimage.

"Just before we signed contracts [for the restaurant], we went down to Nashville

and hit up Prince's, Hattie B's, Pepperfire, Bolton's and 400 Degrees and a few other less notable places," Zaragoza said. "We took elements from each and made our own recipe."

I stopped by the pair's first location in Lakeview (a second is slated for Lincoln Square later this year) to see if they would bring four-alarm heat or just a puff of smoke.

The scene

The space—which used to house Bunny, the Micro Bakery—is tiny. There's limited seating, but patrons can saddle up at two long communal counters that line either side of the narrow restaurant. When I visited on an early Wednesday evening, the

line snaked out the door.

The food

Unlike so many restaurants that open with 50-plus dishes divided into sections with cutesy, off-putting names (appetizers to happy endings), Budlong refreshingly serves just chicken, a few sides and beverages. Of course, there are choices when it comes to the chicken. You pick dark (leg and thigh, \$9-\$16) or white (breast and wing, \$10-\$17) meat and a small (one piece of each) or large (two pieces of each) portion size. Plus, there are four levels of seasoning: Naked, Classic, Medium and X-Hot.

MINI-REVIEW
The Budlong
2928 N. Broadway
773-270-9005
☆☆☆☆
Take it or leave it

The hormone- and antibiotic-free birds get a dry brine (salt is rubbed inside and out) and are breaded and fried to order. Then the crispy skin is brushed with an exclusive spice paste featuring varying levels of cayenne pepper. X-Hot is the exception; the heat here comes from cayenne and a pinch of habanero.

I ordered small portions of the first three spice levels and, because I'm a masochist, a large portion of the X-Hot. All of the meat I tried—including the breast, a cut that's notorious for drying out—was juicy to the bone. However, the flesh was greasy and the skin had soggy spots, usually a sign that the deep-fryer is crowded or the grease isn't hot enough. (This is understandable as the line is constantly out the door.) By the time I got to the X-Hot pieces, I was prepared to declare this Nashville fried chicken experiment a false alarm.

I've had hot chicken in Nashville and Atlanta, and both times it was so spicy that I couldn't take more than a few bites before I was forced to douse the inferno with a quart of beer. However, Budlong's X-Hot chicken boasts a creeping fire that's kissed with citrus from the habanero. The burn is slow, smoldering and compelling. Unlike that of its greasy predecessors, the skin was crisp and slipped off like a silk-lined cloak. If it gets too hot, there's a piece of white bread and decent housemade bread-and-butter pickle slices that help cut the heat.

The sides (\$5 for a small, \$9 for a large) were almost universally well-executed. Elote dripped with Duke's Mayonnaise, crumbly cotija cheese and cayenne. Red-skin potato salad erupted with tangy mustard. Collards—which are sautéed and tossed with smoked ham hock, caramelized onion, salt, sugar and butter—were some of the best greens I've ever had. The only side that suffered was the biscuit (\$3). I ordered three, and two were slightly undercooked and dense. The third was flaky and light. However, they were all gilded with whipped butter flecked with black pepper and brown sugar, which melts into an addictive gravy-like slather.

The drinks and dessert

There's an assortment of cane sugar sodas on offer, including an effervescent cherry-spiked Cheerwine (\$3).

If that doesn't tame the heat, a creamy gelato-based bourbon vanilla wafer milkshake (\$6) will do the trick. The frosty treat is a nostalgic play for Zaragoza.

"When I was a kid, my grandparents would watch me," he said. "My grandfather would get up early and sneak me a bunch of vanilla wafers in a cup with a glass of milk while I watched cartoons."

The service

Each dish was served with a couple of Wet-Naps, but the kitchen crew noticed my fingers were still coated in rust-colored spice as I was cleaning up and brought out more. The servers bussed our table and wrapped up leftovers in a flash.

Bottom line

The X-Hot chicken is the way to go with a habanero-spiked heat that pleases. There's a chance you'll get a soggy piece of bird as the Budlong folks work out the kinks, but if you order a side of collards, you'll hardly mind.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR.
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Chef Jonathan Zaragoza sauces a piece of hot chicken at The Budlong in Lakeview.



Merchandise available at The Budlong



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