



# DUELING

*Chicken-fried or  
country-fried?*

*The question sparks  
friendly fire  
across the South.*

This is chicken-fried steak," the waitress insists, ready to pop me with a ketchup bottle if I pipe up again.

"But it's not battered and deep-fried," I implore (politely, of course, seeing as her grip on that bottle was tightening). "This is *country-fried* steak. Smothered steak. Good, but not what I wanted. I wanted *crispy*."

"Well, you've got *this*," she says, setting down my plate (and that ketchup) and putting a lid on the aggravation. "Besides, everybody knows they're both the same anyway."

*Gasp!* Such mislabeling mayhem needs an explanation. And I am not to find it here in this sleepy diner smack-dab between chicken-fried and country-fried territories. So I hit the road. What I

found beneath all that gravy was enough ammunition to blow a rift between the South's east and west. In defending these savory steaks, people are either fierce chicken-frieders or country-frieders. They aim to protect and, of course, serve.

FIRST I WENT TO TEXAS... home of the world's best chicken-fried steak. It's also home to Eddie Wilson, owner of the legendary Threadgill's in Austin—mecca for chicken-fry fans. The original Threadgill's location, opened in 1933, is bustling. Inside are hefty helpings of comfort food, friendly servers with tattoos here and there, neon beer signs, and photos of such music legends as Janis Joplin, who frequented the place

BY DENISE GEE / PHOTOGRAPHY CHARLES WALTON IV



# S T E A K S

back when musician-founder Kenneth Threadgill threw hootenannies. About that time, Eddie was busy at his first place—the late, great Armadillo World Headquarters (AWH) music hall. He bought Threadgill's in 1980 and opened a second diner last year.

"I'm not shy. I'll tell you what I think," Eddie says in pure Yosemite Sam fashion. "You won't find any country-fried steak on *this* menu. People like to eat here," he says with a wink. "They want something they can really sink their teeth into—not wimpy food."

Exhibit A: The star of Threadgill's menu, chicken-fried steak, is deliriously crisp and tender (but not, of course, cuttable with a fork—it still holds its own). Its milk gravy, rich and creamy, is seasoned to perfection.

"It's like this," Eddie says. "Chicken-

fried has something going for it that country-fried doesn't: crispness. Yet the irony is, it [the gravy] covers it up. And because the crisper it is, the fresher it is, a lot of true chicken-frieders order their gravy on the side just to see how much effort was made to make it right."

But what about all that grease? (That's *juice* to a Texan.) "I don't see too many people worrying about it—they just don't eat it every day," Eddie reasons. "Fifteen years ago we sold so much chicken-fried steak it was almost sinful. Now folks eat more of that chicken-fried *chicken*, which to me, is a lot like drinking a bourbon and Diet Coke."

As for chicken-fried's country-fried cousin? "I associate it with bad grade school cafeteria food or an old Salisbury steak TV dinner," Eddie bristles. "I simply have no use for it." (To page 116)

(Above, left) "My daddy always told me, 'When you go to a restaurant, always try their steak,'" says Threadgill's Eddie Wilson. "That's the true test."

(Above, right) Louisville's Lynn Winter shows off her Country-Fried Steak in Paradise: "It's one of those cherished foods that reminds me of why I came back home."

OFF TO KENTUCKY . . . for country-fried steak in paradise. Actually, Louisville, to Lynn's Paradise Cafe. In this neck of the South, country-fried is king, and decidedly, Lynn's is tops. It has been since the artist-woodworker got into the restaurant business in 1991 after moving home from California.

Lynn offers a wonderfully kitschy decor. Outside, an 8-foot coffeepot pours "coffee" (colored water) into a giant cup, and a gargantuan wall mural—designed with colored corn cobs—has passersby stopping in awe. Inside, 1950s lamps, Formica dinettes, a children's play area, and flea market

treasures keep patrons eyeing not just Lynn's eclectically varied food but also the funky surroundings. There's something for everyone, from Boursin Grilled Rib Eye to down-home country-fried steak.

Lynn's prized skillet steak is often featured at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "It's a *big* hit here," Lynn says. "Kentuckians love tradition and especially enjoy comfort food in a fun setting. Our country-fried steak is pretty straightforward, but cornmeal, cayenne, and garlic give it an updated twist."

Lynn's recipe was adapted from her good friend, cookbook author Ronni Lundy (*Shuck Beans, Stack Cakes, and Honest Fried Chicken*, Atlantic Monthly Press). Ronni adapted hers after a visit with country singer Emmylou Harris, who shared her ideal: "To stop at a roadside diner and tie into a real nice piece of country-fried steak and cream gravy," Emmylou said. "Of course, that's not something you can eat all the time, but every once in a while, it's awfully good. And eating it almost feels like being back home."

"That's exactly how I feel about it," Lynn says. "It's one of those cherished foods that reminds me of why I came back home too." Her

well-seasoned version, with just a hint of crust, is fork-tender yet firm. With a dab of cream gravy, it's a joy to eat. Patrons agree. "Lynn's country-fried steak is awesome," says college student Jim Ames. "It reminds me of my mom's." But what about that chicken-fried steak? "Don't fast-food places sell that stuff?" he asks. "I don't like to gnaw on my meat. Country-fried *rules*."

At that point Lynn hears Eddie's thoughts on the subject. "*Wrong*," she laughs. "When I think of chicken-fried, I think of frozen patties with cheap, packaged gravy. *Country-fried*, on the other hand, is total cast-iron comfort. Give Eddie our recipe, will ya?"

THEN, WE GOT COOKIN' . . . and the winner was . . . undecided. "I like country-fried steak better," said one Test Kitchens staffer, remaining anonymous for fear of chicken-fried retribution. "No way," replied a dyed-in-the-wool chicken-frier. "You obviously haven't lived." (Decide for yourself with our recipes at right.)

The battle continues. "Meanwhile, beyond our borders," muses Texas writer Jerry Flemmons, ". . . horror stories keep coming in. In Oregon, for example, a Texas businessman discovered 'Real Texas Chicken-Fried Steak' on a small-town restaurant menu and quickly ordered it.

" 'Yes sir,' said the young waiter, adding expectantly, 'And how would you like that cooked?'"

*Threadgill's, 6416 Lamar, Austin, TX 78752; (512) 452-9647. New location: 301 Riverside Drive, (512) 472-9304. Note: Threadgill's—The Cookbook (Longstreet Press) is available at bookstores or by calling (770) 980-1488.*

*Lynn's Paradise Cafe, 984 Barret Avenue, Louisville, KY 40204; (502) 583-3447.*



## STEAKING THEIR CLAIM

Learn which steaks are the real McCoy's in this dishy debate.

### CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK:

A tenderized beefsteak—cubed round steak or sirloin—battered and deep-fried until crisp  
**Gravy of choice:** Cream  
**Popular sides:** French-fried or mashed potatoes, crowder peas, squash casserole, Texas toast, beer

**Popular states:** Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas

**Possible origin:** German immigrants' version of Wiener schnitzel

### COUNTRY-FRIED STEAK:

A tenderized beefsteak—cubed round steak or sirloin, dredged in flour and pan-fried  
**Gravy of choice:** Cream or brown

**Popular sides:** Mashed potatoes, green beans, black-eyed peas, cornbread, sweet tea

**Popular states:** Alabama, Carolinas, Mississippi, Kentucky

### Possible origin:

Version of Old English dish called "collops"

## THREADGILL'S CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK AND CREAM GRAVY

- 2 large eggs
- 4 cups milk, divided
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon Meat Seasoning
- 8 (6-ounce) cubed sirloin steaks
- Vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce

- **Whisk** together eggs and 2 cups milk in a medium bowl; set aside.
- **Combine** 1½ cups flour and Meat Seasoning in a medium bowl.
- **Dip** steaks in egg mixture, and dredge in flour mixture. Dip again in egg mixture.
- **Pour** oil to a depth of ¾ inch into a large heavy skillet. Fry steak in batches in hot oil over high heat 1½ to 2½ minutes on each side or until golden. Remove steak, reserving 2 tablespoons drippings in skillet, and drain on paper towels. Keep warm.
- **Heat** reserved drippings in skillet over medium heat; whisk in 2 tablespoons flour, and cook, whisking constantly, until golden. Gradually whisk in remaining 2 cups milk, and cook, whisking constantly, until mixture is thickened and bubbly. Stir in salt and next 3 ingredients. Serve gravy with steak. **Yield:** 8 servings.

### MEAT SEASONING:

- ¼ cup salt
- 2 tablespoons garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon ground white pepper
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- ¾ teaspoon ground red pepper
- ¾ teaspoon ground cumin

• **Combine** all ingredients. Store in an airtight container. **Yield:** ½ cup.

## COUNTRY-FRIED STEAK IN PARADISE

- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup cornmeal
- ¾ teaspoon salt, divided
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper, divided
- Pinch of ground red pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 pound cubed sirloin steak
- 2 tablespoons bacon drippings
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups milk
- **Stir** together ½ cup flour, cornmeal, ½ teaspoon salt, ½ teaspoon pepper, red pepper, and garlic powder in a shallow dish.
- **Cut** steak into 4 pieces, and dredge in flour mixture.
- **Heat** bacon drippings in a large cast-iron skillet until hot. Add steak, and cook 3 to 5 minutes or until browned, turning once. Cover, reduce heat, and cook 15 minutes. Uncover and cook 10 minutes or until crisp, turning once. Drain on paper towels, reserving drippings in skillet;

transfer steak to a serving platter.

- **Heat** reserved drippings in skillet; whisk in 2 tablespoons flour, and cook, whisking constantly, until browned. Gradually whisk in milk, and cook, whisking constantly, 3 to 5 minutes or until thickened. Stir in remaining ¼ teaspoon salt and remaining ½ teaspoon pepper. Serve gravy with steak. **Yield:** 4 servings. ◇

