

Travel article

The 5 Best Places to Go for Nashville Hot & Spicy Chicken

I've had hot, spicy chicken before, but it hasn't been quite like this! We Southerners like our foods hot and spicy – as evidenced by one of my brothers, who drinks Tabasco out of the bottle.

What makes Nashville Hot and Spicy Chicken different? I thought you'd never ask. The secret is all in the wet sauce that's hand-rubbed into each piece before it's pan fried. The wet sauce originally contained, as its base ingredients, 3 parts Cayenne pepper, and 1 part lard. Yes, I said "lard", but don't let that scare you from pure deliciousness – most of them use Canola oil now. Into this pepper paste is added other spices and flavorings, depending on who's doing the hand-rubbing and frying.

Legend has it that the recipe was birthed in the 1950's. Thornton Prince, restaurant owner and womanizer, was "punished" by his girlfriend for coming in too late the night before. She served him fried chicken for breakfast – with lots of extra cayenne pepper. Her plan backfired. Mr. Prince loved the hot chicken so much, that he began serving it in his restaurant. Now, the generations-long tradition of Nashville Hot Fried Chicken has even inspired a festival every summer, the Music City Hot Chicken Festival.

Nashville Fried Chicken is spicy-hot, scrumptious, and definitely leaves an impression on you - or at least on your mouth.

So, grab your lip balm and a big bottle of water while we make the rounds of Nashville's favorite hot and spicy fried chicken haunts.

1 Prince's Hot Chicken Shack

First, let's go to Prince's Hot Chicken Shack, the originator of the Nashville Hot Chicken genre. Still run by Thornton Prince's descendents, this generations-old Nashville tradition is a little hole-in-the-wall sitting unexpectedly in a strip shopping center. And although it's not a stand-alone building, it's still a shack, remember? It says so right in the name. Just consider the decor shabby-chic and you'll be okay – there are a few homemade-looking booths painted glossy white, plastic tablecloths with green leaves on them, and vivid sea-green walls.

Prince's Hot Chicken Shack is revered by its broad array of patrons in an almost cult-like way. The chicken is hot, spicy, freshly fried, and has an afterburn that really lasts. That white bread that it's served on – that wasn't meant to be eaten, but to soak up the grease so the

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chicken would be drier. But go ahead and eat it. If you want to show your friends just how much heat you can handle, eat the spicy-greasy part. If you need something to slow the burn, eat the white parts, rolling it around in your mouth to absorb more of the heat before swallowing.

Visit Prince's during the slow times for meals to avoid long(er) lines at the counter. Oh, and it's best to plan on takeout, then consider yourself lucky if you actually get a table – there are just a few, certainly not enough to accommodate the crowd.

Prince's Hot Chicken Shack
 123 Ewing Drive #3
 Nashville, TN 37207
 (615) 226-9442

Hours:

- Tue-Thu: 12 pm - 10 pm
- Fri: 12 pm - 4 am
- Sat: 2 pm - 4 am

2 Pepperfire Chicken

Next, we're trying Pepperfire Chicken. The freshly-painted tan and red building was easy to find on Gallatin Pike. It's a nice clean place with a very shack-like appearance and atmosphere. There is a generously-sized open pavilion made from raw wood and corrugated tin where you can eat at one of the picnic tables under shelter after you get your chicken at the walk-up window.

Pepperfire recently added a modern option to their ordering procedure - an iPhone app for you to use to order, so your chicken is ready when you arrive. But if you don't use the app and you decide to just show up instead, vintage blues music floats through the pavilion and keeps you mellow while you wait.

I got lucky here – the owner/chef of another local restaurant was having a late lunch at Pepperfire on her day off, and was happy to give me her very experienced opinions before I went to the order window. Cristy Powell owns Eat Well Market, where she and her team whip up low-cost, healthy meals, with an emphasis on organic and local, so I found it a little ironic that she would be at a fried chicken place, but she likes to try different places to eat on her days off. She was very complimentary of the chicken here at Pepperfire.

"The flavor is more complex than some of the others. They don't rely solely on the cayenne," stated Powell. "I like that it's not heavily breaded, the texture is more like a spice rub. And it's more about the chicken than about the heat – although it does leave a burn." Cristy was having the "Medium" heat. "The sides - the baked beans and potato salad - are homemade, you can even see the spices in them. They are really good!"

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With six levels of heat available, you would think that this chicken is all about how hot you can handle. But the flavor of the spice mixture is what you notice first, with the heat building slowly. Vincent, manager of Pepperfire, says that in spite of it being very difficult to deliver the various heat levels consistently, they strive for just that.

Service at Pepperfire is excellent. Vincent recognizes his regular customers and knows what their preferred heat level is, delivering it just as they like it each time. He will also make certain that if you are a new customer, you know just exactly what you are getting into when you walk up and order “Double Extra Hot”.

Pepperfire Chicken
2821 Gallatin Pike
Nashville, TN 37216
(615) 582-4824
<http://www.pepperfirechicken.com/>
Hours:

- Mon, Tues, Thurs, Fri, Sat: 11am - 9pm
- Wednesday: 11am - 3pm

3 Bolton’s Spicy Chicken & Fish

After a short drive, here we are at Bolton’s Spicy Chicken & Fish. It was easy to find, as it’s sitting right on the sidewalk of East Nashville’s main thoroughfare. The building is a tiny cinderblock shack painted gray, with bold hand-painted signage of fish and chicken.

As I walked in, a delicious rush of the hot aroma from chicken and fish greeted me, and combined with the bubble-gum pink interior walls and red plastic tablecloths for an unforgettable introduction.

Bolton’s is another generations-old chicken shack that is one of Nashville’s venerable institutions. Fortunately for me, I got there during the late afternoon slow business time and Tonya, the niece of the current generation of Bolton ownership, was happy to talk to me.

“Uncle Roy” fries every customer’s chicken to order in a cast iron skillet. By cooking it at a low temperature, he insures that the chicken is tender and moist on the inside, and crunchy with the spice mixture on the outside. Mr. Bolton has a signature spice mixture that he uses, altering that spice mixture with additional other spices for each of the varying levels of heat offered, with the result that every heat level has a different flavor. For instance, the “Mild” chicken or fish has a sweet/hot flavor, a very different experience from the swollen lips and sweat-drenched “Extra Hot”.

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Whenever Mr. Bolton tastes a spice that inspires his creativity, he will add it into his signature spice mixture for a few days, giving customers the surprise of varying flavors each time they visit.

Customers Matt and Matthew, who were trying Bolton's Spicy Chicken & Fish for the first time today, said that their chicken had a very good combination of flavors, that it wasn't just hot. Hopefully they'll enjoy Uncle Roy's next creative variation of his spice mixture when they visit again!

Bolton's Spicy Chicken & Fish

624 Main Street

Nashville, TN 37206

(615) 254-8015

Hours:

- Mon-Thu: 11 am - 9 pm
- Fri-Sat: 11 am - 12 am

4 400 Degrees Hot Chicken

400 Degrees Hot Chicken. The name, at least, is all about the heat. Owner Aquí Simpson grew up eating at Prince's, but after graduating from college, decided to try her hand in the restaurant business by making an even better hot chicken than her long-time favorite. Her customers all rave that she has succeeded.

Aquí's hot seasoning recipe, although using a generous amount of the requisite cayenne, also includes liberal doses of paprika and other non-disclosed spices on her buttermilk-marinated chicken. Her chicken is encrusted with a nice thick crispy layer of spicy heat, the perfect chicken skin crust.

You choose your spicy-heat level by choosing "degrees" – do you want "0 degrees" (regular fried chicken), "100 degrees" (a lot of flavor with mild heat that gives just a little burn), "200" (medium make your head sweat heat) or "400" (be careful with that 400!)? If you're not sure which level you want, they'll let you try the flavor on a fry before committing it to your chicken order.

Inside the crust, the chicken is moist, tender, and flavorful. At 400 Degrees Hot Chicken, the chicken is deep-fried, rather than pan-fried, and everything is cooked fresh to order. You can even have her special recipe on thick and juicy pork chops as well.

Ms. Simpson is deep-South friendly and as sweet as her tea, and she holds all her employees to her own standards of friendliness. You can expect great service and great chicken here at 400 Degrees.

400 Degrees Hot Chicken

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319 Peabody Street
Nashville, TN 37210
(Corner of 4th Avenue)
Inside the Quizno Building
(615) 244-4467
<http://www.400degreeshotchicken.com/>

Hours:

- Tuesday – Friday: 11am – 7pm
- Saturday: Noon – 5pm

5 Hattie B's

Hattie B's, near Vanderbilt and Music Row in MidTown, is the newest of the Nashville Hot Chicken specialty spots, and the only one that serves craft beer on draft. Corrugated metal, chicken wire, chalkboards, light strings, and whitewashed picnic tables create an authentic, but slightly more upscale, "chicken shack" atmosphere.

Owned by father and son Nick and Nick Bishop – Sr. and Jr., five levels of heat are offered, from "Hot" to "Not". They call their mildest version "Southern" (no heat), and their hottest "Damn Hot". The sides are excellent, and, take it from a Mac and Cheese lover, the interesting twist of putting pimento into traditional Mac and Cheese is great! And if you don't want the craft beer, hand-squeezed lemonade and Southern sweet tea cool your palate between bites of chicken.

Don't let the new-ness of Hattie B's scare you, these guys really know what they're doing. Their experience in their other restaurant, Bishop's in Cool Springs, has been invaluable in fine-tuning their various recipes for Hattie B's. After all, at Bishop's, they are accustomed to serving hundreds of pounds of chicken every week.

After your meal, be sure and top off your visit to Hattie B's Hot Chicken with a scoop of ice cream to cool that scalded palate!

Hattie B's Hot Chicken
112 19th Ave S
Nashville, TN 37203
(615) 678-4794
<http://www.hattieb.com/>

Hours:

- Mon-Thur: 11am – 10pm
- Fri-Sat: 11am – 12am
- Sun: 11am – 4pm

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Bonus Round: Scoreboard Restaurant and Sports Bar

Scoreboard Restaurant and Sports Bar wasn't on my radar until Cristy, who I met back at Pepperfire, mentioned it as one of the best. Just across from Opryland, Scoreboard doesn't feel like a traditional Nashville chicken shack. After all, the name tells us exactly what it is – a sports bar. Expect live music, draft local beers, tournament nights, karaoke nights, sports on the tv, and a full menu.

Their hot chicken specialty ranges in intensity from “Sissy” to “Satan’s Tongue”. The skin is crispy, the chicken hot and juicy, and the “Medium” leaves a nice afterburn. They stick with the Nashville chicken shack tradition and serve it sitting on white bread with dill pickle coins. Lots of sides are available, and servings are large.

And, if you're a biker, be sure and check for their once-a-month Bike Nights.

It's a little hard to find, as you can't see it from either of the main streets, Music Valley Drive or McGavock Pike, but drive around the back of the buildings facing those streets and you'll see it right away.

And, regardless of where you decide to go, you enjoy your Nashville Hot Chicken, you hear?

Scoreboard Restaurant and Sports Bar
2410 Music Valley Dr
Nashville, TN 37214
(615) 883-3866
<http://www.scoreboardbar.net/>
Hours:
• Mon-Sun: 11am – 2:45am