



CHICKEN FRIED STEAK

SERVES 4

- 2 cups plus 3 tbsp. flour
- 2 tsp. paprika
- Freshly ground black pepper and kosher salt, to taste
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 tsp. Tabasco, plus more to taste
- 1 egg
- 4 4-oz. cube steaks, pounded to $\frac{1}{4}$ " thickness
- Canola oil, for frying
- 3 tbsp. unsalted butter
- 2 cups milk

1 Heat oven to 200°; put a baking sheet fitted with a rack inside. In a shallow dish, whisk together 2 cups flour, paprika, pepper, and salt. In another dish, whisk together buttermilk, 1 tsp. Tabasco, and egg. Season steaks with salt and pepper. Working with one steak at a time, dredge in flour mixture, then egg mixture, and again in flour; shake off excess. Transfer to plate.

2 Pour oil into a 12" cast-iron skillet to a depth of $\frac{1}{2}$ "; heat over medium-high heat until a deep-fry thermometer reads 320°. Working in 2 batches, fry steaks, flipping once, until golden brown, 6-8 minutes. Place steaks on rack in oven to keep warm.

3 Melt butter in a 2-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Whisk in remaining flour; cook until golden, 1-2 minutes. Whisk in milk; cook, whisking, until thick. Season with Tabasco and salt and pepper. Serve steaks with gravy.

has its proponents who believe it's the original. According to Jane and Michael Stern's book *Eat Your Way Across the U.S.A.* (Broadway Books, 1997), "the chicken-fried steak was a Depression-era invention of Hill Country German-Texans". German-style CFS is made of pounded-thin beef cube steak, dredged in bread crumbs or cracker meal and fried crisp like schnitzel.

The cowboy version is often called a pan-fried steak in West Texas, where it's the most popular. It's said that chuck wagon cooks, who tenderized their steaks by beating them with anything handy, would simply dredge them in flour before frying them to a crisp.

Southern-style CFS has a thick, crunchy crust that looks like the coating on a piece of Southern fried chicken. It's the most commonly found in East Texas, where cotton plantations thrived before the Civil War. In claiming this rich style as the original, adherents have the advantage of pointing to the word *chicken* in CFS's name and to the cookbooks dating all the way back to the early 1800s that contain recipes for cutlets dredged in flour and dipped in egg batter.

There was a CFS sandwich and a pan-fried steak on the Finish Line's menu. The latter, a juicy cube steak with a flavorful crust and a side of creamy gravy, was a beautiful thing. That there even was a third steak came as a surprise: noting my unusual interest in CFS, Jenny Herrington suggested that I try her grandmother's version. To make this off-menu variety, Ms. Brown dredges her steak in seasoned flour, then in a batter of eggs and buttermilk, then in the flour again.

With an awesome, rippled crust that shattered when I bit through to the tender steak, Granny's version turned out to be a solid example of a classic Southern-style CFS, and the clear winner. —Robb Walsh