

## Monkey Wrench Skillet Fried Chicken

Here's what Louisville, Kentucky, restaurant reviewer Marty Rosen has to say about the fried chicken at Dennie Humphrey's artful eatery and performance space, the Monkey Wrench: "It's a plate that stays true to its southern origins but blends the tradition with keenly imaginative touches: the rich dark sweetness of local sorghum, hints of smoke, a dash of heat supplied by a fire-roasted banana pepper aioli."

Here's how Executive Chef Dustin Staggers pulls it off, adapted for the home cook. The first trick he uses is to soak the chicken overnight in brine made of the combined juice from pickled banana peppers and dill pickles. You do not need to be exact in making this brine at home. You want about a cup, and if you don't have quite enough, you can add salted water to extend (1 teaspoon salt to ¼ cup water). You will use some of the banana peppers for the aioli and can use others to garnish.

### CHICKEN

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- 4 large chicken breasts with skin and bone
  - ½ cup juice from jar of pickled banana peppers, plus more if needed
  - ½ cup juice from jar of dill pickles, plus more if needed
  - ½ cup flour
  - ½ teaspoon salt
  - ¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
  - 4 tablespoons melted butter (optional)
  - Lard or vegetable shortening to fry
  - 2 tablespoons sorghum syrup
  - Banana Pepper Aioli (see below)
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Marinate the chicken for 24 hours in brine made from combining the juice from pickled banana peppers and juice from dill pickles in a large, sealable, plastic food-storage bag.

When you are ready to fry, in a separate plastic bag, combine the flour, salt, and pepper. Remove chicken and discard brine. (At the Monkey Wrench, cooks pat the chicken dry and dredge in melted

butter, but you may skip this step if you wish.) Place chicken, one piece at a time, in the flour mixture, close bag, and shake and turn gently until chicken is evenly coated in the flour. As you remove the piece from the bag, shake gently to discard any loose breading. Do the same for each piece of chicken.

In a large skillet, preferably cast iron, melt enough lard or shortening to fill the skillet ½-inch deep. Turn the heat to high and adjust as necessary so that the grease is hot enough that a fleck of flour dances but not hot enough to smoke, about 350°F.

Lay the chicken in the hot oil, skin side down, then turn the heat to medium and fry until the skin side gets golden and crispy, 12 to 15 minutes. Turn chicken over, and fry until that side is golden as well and chicken reaches an internal temperature of 165°F. Remove to drain briefly on rack. Serve warm, crisscrossed with drizzles of sorghum and aioli. Serves 4.

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#### BANANA PEPPER AIOLI

2 tablespoons minced pickled banana pepper  
 2 teaspoons juice from jar of pickled banana peppers  
 ¼ cup mayonnaise  
 1 tablespoon sour cream, buttermilk, or plain Greek yogurt  
 Salt and black pepper

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Combine all the ingredients, adding salt and pepper to taste.

## Seared Steak and Lentil Salad

This savory but nourishing salad has become a favorite entrée served with a hearty bread.

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1 cup dried green lentils  
 2 cups water  
 ¾ teaspoon salt  
 1 tablespoon sorghum syrup

- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
  - 3 tablespoons Orange Sorghum Vinegar (page 000), divided
  - 1 pound skirt, Denver, or sirloin steak, about 1-inch thick, visible fat removed
  - 1 head fennel sliced fine in 1-inch lengths
  - ½ cup mayonnaise
  - 2 tablespoons minced fresh fennel fronds
  - Salt and freshly ground black pepper
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Pick over lentils, discarding any wrinkled ones or debris, then rinse and place in saucepan. Add water and bring to a lively simmer on high, then turn heat down to create a gentle simmer. Cook for 20 to 30 minutes uncovered, until lentils are just tender but still whole (*al dente*). Drain and place in large bowl, then add salt and toss.

While lentils are cooking, make the marinade by combining sorghum, soy sauce, and 1 tablespoon of the vinegar, stirring until sorghum is dissolved. Soak the steak in marinade at room temperature for 20 minutes, turning 3 or 4 times to equally dredge both sides.

Remove steak from marinade and let drain on rack while you heat the pan, but do not pat the steak dry. Choose a cast-iron or heavy steel skillet that will allow the steak to cover most of the surface. Spray the skillet lightly with cooking oil and heat on medium high until a few drops of water splashed on the surface skitter and dance. Lay steak on hot surface and leave for about two minutes to sear, then turn and brown the other side as well. Remove from pan to deglaze, using the marinade for liquid. Return steak to pan and simmer on medium for 3 to 5 minutes, turning once, until steak is cooked medium rare.

Remove pan from heat and steak from pan, and using a minimum of water (1 to 2 tablespoons), deglaze pan again and set aside. Slice meat in thin strips, then cut strips in bite-size pieces, about 1-inch wide. Pour warm marinade over the steak and toss to coat. Mix steak and marinade with the lentils. Add sliced fennel and toss.

In a small bowl, whisk together mayonnaise, 2 tablespoons of the vinegar, and minced fennel fronds. Pour over lentil and steak mixture and toss thoroughly to coat. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serves 6 as main course salad.