



J.L. SOUSA PHOTOS, REGISTER

A bucket of chicken from Blanchard's Fried Chicken.

A pop-up at Blanchard's

Sommelier-turned-chef perfects his fried chicken

TONY POER

If the pop-up restaurant concept seems spontaneous these days, Napa Valley wine veteran Chris Blanchard takes a different view. By way of his own pop-up events and side business, the master sommelier and fried chicken enthusiast is working hard to master the art of southern cooking, a bucket and biscuit at a time.

Earlier this year, Blanchard and his wife, Lauren, were searching for a commercial kitchen space in downtown Napa. The couple became sold on a facility tucked away at the back of the Tannery Row complex on South Coombs Street. Breezes blowing off of the Napa River and views across the water were an added bonus.

Several weeks later, Blanchard's Fried Chicken was born, a combination of gourmet destination and gritty determination—with cheese grits on the side.

"I want to make food that's fun, that's soulful, that's a little bit different," the sommelier-turned-fry cook said recently while mixing gallons of cole slaw. It was a couple of days



Chris Blanchard of Blanchard's Fried Chicken checks a fryer basket of chicken for to see how done it is.

before Blanchard's latest Friday take out night, which evolved from the popular fried chicken pop-ups he pulled off last year at local restaurants like Angèle, Torc and Oenotri.

"I'm a white guy making soul food. I like stuff that has some soul to it, that isn't the same old thing, and that's what we're doing here. It's a great time, and the food is awesome."

A couple of Fridays a month, Blanchard prep his ingredients—dozens of birds, of course, but also the slaw, mac and cheese, biscuits, and collard greens that complement his New Orleans-style fried chicken—and his wife opens the kitchen doors

to customers who have placed orders online. A few close friends help execute the menu to a rocking blues soundtrack of John Lee Hooker and Buddy Guy.

Buckets and sides leave with happy customers who, through social media and word-of-mouth, find their way to the Blanchard's Fried Chicken website. It's like a wine club, but for fried chicken.

"It's a different concept than the pop-ups in that I have this club called The Bucket List," Blanchard explained. "People sign up to get notifications of when the next take out night is going to be."

So far, all of the menu items

have been selling out in advance, but he confessed it isn't exactly a money-maker. "It's a labor of love. I know customer service pretty well, so we try to make everybody happy. We have a good time, there's music playing, and like I said, we're just doing it because it's fun."

"It pays the rent," he added, "but above that, I'm not making a bunch of money. It might be better to go talk about wine at a seminar somewhere."

Blanchard earned his master sommelier degree in 2008 and has worked for the last few years as national sales manager for Vine Hill Ranch in Oakville. Wine is his passion, but his obsession with southern cooking goes back much further, through the family legend of his grandmother, Opal, who died shortly before he was born.

"She was the first school teacher for an all-black school in Wichita, Kansas," he said, describing the woman who would end up a respected educator in South Carolina during the tumultuous late 1950s. "Just like a lot of people's grandmothers in the South, she was a nice grandma who made food to make her family happy."

"So this is grandma food, you know, which is fantastic. I feel

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Take-out: fried chicken, plus the fixings, in Napa

PATRICIA CORRIGAN

"Fried chicken is booming," according to restaurant industry analyst Darren Tristano, and Napa County is in on the trend.

Why fried chicken? Fried chicken is "comfort food, convenience food, immigrant food, and a cutting-edge trendsetter all at the same time," says Adrian Miller, author of "Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time." Miller adds, "We're deeply immersed in a fried chicken moment these days."

Locally, esteemed chefs have elevated the humble picnic food to new heights, and this summer they are selling their fried chicken at pop-ups.

In Napa, Southside offers Fried Chicken Friday on the first Friday of every month. "Fried chicken has long been a signature item

at Smoke, the catering company we opened 10 years ago, and now we can showcase the dish once a month through our restaurant," said Irma Robinson, co-owner of the coffee house and café with Morgan, her husband.

Morgan, previously a chef at Franciscan Estate Winery, said he started making fried chicken about 15 years ago, using a recipe from *Cooks Illustrated* magazine. Today, he starts by brining the birds for 24 hours in a mixture of saltwater, kosher salt, sliced lemons, fresh thyme and garlic cloves.

"You can try different things with fried chicken, but the secret is not cutting any corners," he said. Next, the chicken soaks in buttermilk for 24 hours. A bucket with 10 pieces of chicken costs

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J.L. SOUSA, REGISTER

White Lily Buttermilk Biscuits

Yields 20 biscuits.

- 5 lb. bag of White Lily Self-Rising flour
- 1 lb. unsalted butter, cubed and frozen for at least 1 hour
- 1 quart buttermilk
- 2 cups heavy cream
- Room temperature butter for folding (about 1/2 cup)

In a food processor, cut in the cold butter with the flour. You want to achieve pea-sized chunks of butter. Transfer the mixture to a large mixing bowl.

Once the butter is cut in, add the buttermilk and cream at once. Using your hands, mix the dough until combined.

Note: You want to work the dough as little as possible, just bringing it together to form a mass without developing the gluten. Move the dough around gently, but do not knead.

Transfer half of the dough to a lightly floured wooden surface. Cover the other half tightly with plastic wrap. Using a rolling pin, roll out the dough to about an inch thickness.

When the dough is rolled out, spread a light coating of the softened butter with an offset pastry spatula to over 2/3 of the dough.

Fold the unbuttered 1/3 of the dough over 1/3 of the rest of the dough. Follow by folding the remaining 1/3 of the dough on top of the entire dough.

What you are doing here is laminating the dough to achieve a lighter, flakier biscuit.

Flip the dough over onto a clean, lightly floured surface. Roll the dough out to the desired thickness, typically just short of the height of your biscuit cutter.

Cut with a floured biscuit cutter. Important: do not twist the biscuit cutter, simply push up and down.

Line up the biscuits on parchment-lined sheet trays so they are touching. This helps aide the rise of the biscuits. Wrap the tray of biscuits tightly with plastic wrap and transfer to the freezer for at least one hour.

When ready to bake, pull the biscuits from the freezer, unwrap and place directly in 400 degree Fahrenheit oven for 25-30 minutes or until light golden brown. Check to make sure the center biscuits are cooked.

Serve biscuits warm or reheat in a 350-degree F oven for 10 minutes.

AMUSE-BOUCHE

Waste not

As I write this, I'm getting ready to head out of town for a short trip. Since I'll be gone nearly a week, I have been cleaning out the fridge in anticipation.

I started a few days ago, by refraining from buying anything perishable (which is pretty much everything, in the heat we have been having), and trying to use up what was left in my veggie bins.



BETTY TELLER

As I was pulling together a final salad the other night, I was reminded of another meal long ago, back in my college days.

I was staying at home and working at a mindless summer job while my parents and younger sisters were gallivanting around Europe. (They were doing it on the way cheap, crammed into a too-small rental car, and camping, so I wasn't exactly sorry not to be with them. Their travel style made even the classic student backpack trip of that era, complete with Eurailpass, youth hostels and the "Europe on \$5 a Day" book, look luxurious.)

So anyway, there I was alone in the house, fending for myself in the boring burbs and marking time until I could go back to school. I can't recall what I was eating for dinner while I was there — probably stuff mom had left in the freezer. I wasn't going hungry, but nevertheless, I was very grateful when one of her friends called me up and invited me over for dinner.

When I showed up at her house, the chicken was in the oven and she was just starting to make the salad. She brushed aside my offer to help, but invited me into the kitchen to keep her company.

She pulled the salad ingredients out of the refrigerator and started working with them one by one, while I watched in fascination (and utter horror).

She began with the lettuce. The tips of the leaves had gotten brown and mushy, so she cut them off and salvaged the few good parts. Then she moved onto the cucumber. It had gone soft at one end and had a few other bad spots, so she nonchalantly cut around

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FRESHLY PICKED

Peach season

We are fortunate to live in the Napa Valley with peach orchards nearby. We can enjoy juicy, tree-ripened peaches from May to September.

In China, where the peach originated, it is a symbol of longevity and immortality.

There are thousands of peach varieties. The two main types are freestone and cling. With freestone peaches, the pit separates easily from the flesh. This type is easier to cook with as the



JULIE LOGUE-RIORDAN

peaches are easy to cut. Cling peaches behave as their name implies: the stone (pit) clings to the flesh, making these a bit of a challenge for cooking but fine for eating out of hand.

The Napa Farmers Market is the perfect place to buy peaches. You will find tree-ripened, sweet, juicy varieties you can't find in a grocery store. They are picked by the grower when they are nearly ripe. Most supermarket peaches are picked under-ripe and firm to withstand shipping and handling, so they will never be as sweet as peaches from the farmers' market.

If you are not eating or using them all in one day, select peaches with a range of ripeness so you can enjoy them throughout the week.

Peaches should smell sweet at the stem end and should have a little give at the shoulders. A red or pink blush does not indicate ripeness. Depending on the

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CHEF'S TABLE

Honors for Miminashi

Miminashi, Napa Valley's Iza-kaya-style, (Japanese pub) restaurant, has been named one of Wine Enthusiast Magazine's 100 Best Wine Restaurants for 2017, honoring "the most dynamic, charming, and innovative wine and food experiences in the country."

The Wine Enthusiast will showcase the 100 Best Wine Restaurants in its annual August Restaurant issue with a launch party celebrating the winners on Monday, June 26 at La Sirena Restaurant in New York. The magazine hits the newsstands on June 27.

The list spotlights restaurants that showcase great beverage programs along with notable food, atmosphere, and excellent service. Forty-four of this year's winning spots are new to the list, including Miminashi.

Created by chef, owner and fourth-generation Napan Curtis Di Fede, Miminashi is a Californian interpretation of a Japanese izakaya, a casual dining experience focused on quality ingredients and outstanding technique,

offering dishes such as karaage, gyoza, okonomiyaki, binchotan grilled meats, robata-yaki and yakitori skewers, along with noodles, rice and ramen bowls. Miminashi also offers Japanese soft cream (ice cream) in traditional flavors. Local and international wine selections, premium sake, beers from Northern California and Japan, and cocktails complement the menu.

Curtis brings a top team to Miminashi, including wine director Jessica Pinzon, formerly of the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group, Andrew Salazar who oversees the cocktail program and Sam Mckenzie, chef de cuisine.

Miminashi is open for lunch Monday through Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and daily for dinner, Monday–Thursday from 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5 to 11 p.m., and Sunday from 5 to 9:30 p.m.

Miminashi is at 821 Coombs Street, Napa. For details, call 707-254-9464 or visit www.miminashi.com.



EMMA K. MORRIS PHOTO
Miminashi chef and owner Curtis Di Fede and Jessica Pinzon, wine director.

Miminashi Little Gem Lettuces

Chef Curtis Di Fede
Serves 3-4

- 3-4 heads of little gem lettuces (about one head per person)
- 1 1/2 cups of safflower oil
- 1/4 cup of yellow or white miso
- 1-2 cloves of grated garlic (1 clove if large, 2 cloves if small)
- 1/2 cup of rice wine vinegar
- 1-2 whole avocado
- 5 red radishes thinly sliced
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a large bowl separate the outer leaves of the little gems and discard. Save the inner most tender pieces. Depending on the size of the little gems you may need more. In a blender add the miso, rice wine vinegar and the grated garlic. Blend until smooth. With the blender still on remove cap and add safflower oil slowly to create an emulsion. Once all the safflower oil is incorporated remove from blender and refrigerate. Wait one hour. Mix the little gem lettuces and dressing in a large bowl with salt and pepper. Add sliced radishes and avocados to garnish the salad.

Blanchard

From CI

like I'm a grandma cooking for all these strangers I don't even know, welcoming them into my house, coming in to get some chicken and some greens."

Last Friday, the scene at their kitchen reflected what the Blanchards have worked hard to create. Lauren, whose own day job is general manager at Savage and Cook distillers on Mare Island, looked over her printed list of customer orders for that evening. Pick-up times scheduled between four and seven o'clock afforded her some control over the fast pace. Her husband and friends moved quickly around the kitchen, from hot stove tops to pressure fryer to convection oven, while Canned Heat played in the background.

"We have a general idea of



J.L. SOUSA PHOTOS, REGISTER
Chris Blanchard holds two pieces of his fried chicken.



This is a sample of Chris Blanchard's fried chicken, before frying and after.

"The great thing about New Orleans is that the ladies who come bring you food—or the men—they're full of love."

what time people are coming, and as long as about 50 percent of the people show up at the time they say, then we're in very good shape from the kitchen's standpoint," Lauren explained. Then she laughed that "the

first evening was quite a rude awakening!"

"But we've got our system down now. Everybody is just really excited to get some great fried chicken."

As people lined up outside, the reporter was invited to sample a plump, spicy chicken thigh, collard greens, and fairly decadent mac and cheese. Blanchard, who greets almost every customer at the door as they're picking up their food, nodded with appreciation at the Louisiana-style array of dishes.

"The great thing about New Orleans is that the ladies who come bring you

food—or the men—they're full of love. You know, they give you a bucket of chicken, and you smile, and they say, 'That's for you, baby!' And then you take it, and you eat it, and you're so happy!"

Around 5 p.m., Nash Cognetti, the executive chef at Tra Vigne Pizzeria in St. Helena, wandered in for a taste of the signature dish and called it "undoubtedly the greatest fried chicken in the state of California."

Another chef, Napa's now-retired Greg Cole, has been a customer since the "BFC" debut. Reached on the phone, he was a little more judicious. "As a kitchen

person and as a chef, I really enjoy watching front-of-the-house people struggle in the kitchen," he laughed, echoing Lauren. "The first time was disaster, although the food was fantastic."

"Chris's apron was very dirty, but there was a big box of corn flakes right there, which is always a good sign when you're taking home fried chicken."

Cole recalled enjoying a rosé Champagne during Blanchard's pop-up dinner at Angèle last year, which he described as the perfect wine for fried chicken. Ever the sommelier, Blanchard mentioned that in the near future he hopes to acquire a type 85 wine license so he and Lauren can sell Champagne to go. At the very least, they'll have something in their glass to toast their endeavor.

"You know, I love wine; wine's great. But the cooking is really fun. I love that, too, and fried chicken's something a little bit different that we can bring to Napa. It's something with soul that has its own personality."

Chris Blanchard

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Blanchard's Buttermilk Fried Chicken

Whole fryer cut in 8 pieces:
2 breasts, 2 wings, 2 thighs, 2 drumsticks

Do this in three parts starting with the soak in buttermilk for at least 24 hours and up to 4 days. When you are ready to cook, make your flour mixture and then fry pieces in either a small home fryer or a cast iron skillet.

Buttermilk wash:

- 3 cups buttermilk
 - 1 egg
 - 1/4 cup Tabasco hot sauce
 - 2 tablespoons El Yucateco Chile Habanero XXX hot sauce
 - 2 rough chopped jalapeno peppers
 - 1 tablespoon black pepper
 - 1 tablespoon salt
- Combine buttermilk, egg, hot sauces, jalapeno and remaining dry ingredients in large bowl. Add chicken to the bowl and mix up thoroughly with your hands.

Flour coat and seasoning:

- 3 cups self rising flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- 2 tablespoons Tony Chachere's Creole Seasoning
- 3 tablespoons cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons black pepper
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 1/2 cup crushed Flaming Hot Cheetos

Heat vegetable (or canola or lard) oil to temp of 325 degrees. Combine flour and all ingredients in a large mixing bowl. (Chicken needs to warm up, not right out of fridge!) Throw a few tablespoons of buttermilk in to flour, take chicken pieces out of the buttermilk, shake off and coat with the flour mixture so that NO moisture shows. Lay into the fryer at 325 degrees for 8 mins to a golden brown and then finish in oven 6 more minutes at 380 degrees. Remove, sprinkle lightly with coarse salt and allow to cool on a rack over paper towels. Serve.

Optional Nashville Hot Style

- 1/2 cup lard, melted and heated (or hot frying oil)
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon packed light brown sugar
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- Dill pickle chips

Make the spicy coating: Carefully ladle the lard or frying oil into a medium heat proof bowl with butter and whisk in the cayenne pepper, brown sugar, 3/4 teaspoon sea salt, 1 teaspoon black pepper, the paprika and garlic powder. Baste the spice mixture over the hot fried chicken and serve immediately with cold dill pickle chips