

Cincinnati Food Scene Bounces Back

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This photo taken May 17, 2014 shows fried chicken and side dishes, spoonbread, rear left, and mac & cheese, at The Eagle restaurant in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood of Cincinnati, a picturesque neighborhood on the edge of downtown that locals simply call OTR. (AP Photo/Al Behrman)

CINCINNATI (AP) — When it comes to cuisine, Cincinnati is known for its quirky version of chili, a pile of sweet, cinnamon-flavored meat sauce served over spaghetti, topped with a heaping mound of shredded cheddar.

Locals who grew up eating the stuff love it and insist on forcing unwitting out-of-town guests to try it. But let's be honest, if you're not from these parts, it tastes pretty strange. More like something you'd eat on a dare than a craving.

What truly makes Cincinnati's dining scene special is what's happening in the city's Over-the-Rhine Historic District, a picturesque neighborhood on the edge of downtown that locals simply call OTR.

Like many urban neighborhoods across the U.S., OTR fell on hard times during the 1970s and 1980s. It later became one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country and the site of race riots in 2001. But gentrification has turned the former haven for prostitution and drugs into a pulsing hangout filled with new restaurants and bars.

One of the gems of the bunch, The Eagle, has been seducing Cincinnati with cheap fried chicken since December.

Quaint but small, located in what was once a post office, The Eagle is a hard place to get a table. They don't take reservations and wait times are regularly quoted at three hours. The bar area teems with people hoping to snag a stool, a task that can

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be tense for the impatient.

But it's worth the wait.

For \$9, two people can split half of a fried, free-range Ohio Amish chicken, served with spicy hot honey. A whole chicken is \$18.

The chicken is crunchy, juicy, simple and pretty much perfect.

So perfect that the handful of people on staff allowed to make what they call the chicken dredge — basically all the good stuff on the outside — have to sign confidentiality clauses to keep the recipe secret. The only ingredient owners are willing to share is black pepper, which they use just enough of to give the chicken a unique kick without overpowering it.

Of the handful of side dishes at The Eagle, the \$5 spoonbread stands out. It's a slightly less dense version of a sweet cornbread, a nice balance to the hot honey and peppery chicken.

The \$5 macaroni and cheese is made with five cheeses and red pepper flakes, and topped with toasted breadcrumbs. It's creamy and comforting, and though more popular than the spoonbread, it's not quite as unforgettable.

Those interested in even more carbs can get boneless fried chicken in massive sandwich form, a popular option at The Eagle, or try out the pork shoulder sandwich, a staff favorite.

For the owners of The Eagle, who opened their wildly popular taco bar Bakersfield down the street in 2011 at the beginning of OTR's transformation, the success of their fried chicken joint has been "magical," said Lauren Altman, general manager of The Eagle.

"It was like putting out a second album, and luckily it's been a homerun," she said.

Altman said the key to both restaurants is simplicity.

"We really aren't reinventing the wheel," she said. "We're making really, really good comforting food, and food that somebody else has done. We just kind of dialed it in."

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