

MONTANA FOOD

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LET'S COOK!



GREG PATENT

Crispy yeasted waffle topped with creamed chicken, carrots and peas for dinner. Sliced scallions garnish this outstanding dish.

Waffles are good for more than breakfast

I blame Mildred Pierce for starting me on my chicken and waffle quest. Remember the film? Based on James M. Cain's novel and starring Joan Crawford, chicken and waffles shone as the signature dish at her celebrated Glendale, California, restaurant.



GREG PATENT

For me, the pairing of fried chicken and waffles just seemed strange and didn't make any sense.

Why mix a breakfast classic with something you'd be happy to eat for lunch or dinner? How did this combo come to be?

I took a dive online and learned this dish has quite a murky history. Some historians say it originated with soul food. And over time, as its popularity grew, other cultures adopted it. By the mid-1800s, waffles with chicken and gravy were a beloved Sunday supper in many Pennsylvania Dutch homes.

I can see why diners flocked to restaurants for fried chicken and waffles. The crunchiness of both is irresistible. But what home cook wanted to mess with frying chicken and making waffles at the same time?

The good news is I've come up with a recipe that solves the time and effort dilemma. You don't even have to cook

a chicken! You can buy a rotisserie chicken, cut up some of it, and add it to your homemade cream sauce to serve on top of a homemade crispy waffle.

Not only that, you make Marion Cunningham's yeasted waffle batter the night before. And it keeps for days in the refrigerator, ready when you are, to bake up into the most delicious crispy waffles.

Many years ago, Marion Cunningham made these waffles for me in her home kitchen. For lunch. With chicken. As she says, waffles are not only for breakfast.

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LAST BEST PLATES

A new idea hatched

A restaurant remake by Calvin Tang hatched Kal's Chicken Coop in January. In Billings, on 24th Street West, Tang has transformed his restaurant JP Kitchen, once serving modern Asian cuisine to now a diner-style eatery



STELLA FONG

featuring fried hand breaded chicken tenders. The experience is fast-casual with chicken sandwiches, chicken tenders and fries.

The original red and black colored space symbolizing good fortune and sky, designed by Jeremiah Young of Kibler and Kirch, has been refashioned. Chic Asian is now a playful farmhouse with black checkered tablecloths covering tables flanked with yellow chairs and red stools. In white cursive script, the words "Kal's Chicken" display prominently over the kitchen, prep and service area. The black pendant lights that once hung low over the tables now float higher above.

While JP Kitchen honored the 26-year-legacy of Jade Palace, a restaurant started by his parents Stephen and Selina, Tang is finding his own "concept where I can still cook and be adaptable to Billings." After closing JP Kitchen in July for six months when an employee tested positive for COVID-19 and having extended his lease for another five years, Tang had to figure out what to do next.

"In the kitchen, I took out the wok range. We cut it up, 8,000 pounds of steel and metal was recycled." With an additional fryer in place and a new grill, he was set, "We're more in the volume game rather than focusing on each individual touch point." These days he processes about 40 to 50 pounds of chicken thighs, and the same volume of breasts per day. The dark meat goes into his hot sandwiches while the breasts

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FLASH IN THE PAN!

A colorful, natural eggsperience

The egg came first; let's just get that out of the way. For millions of years before humans domesticated the feathered lizards we now call "chickens," countless generations of amphibia and reptiles, including dinosaurs, were laying eggs.



ARI LEVAUX

The egg is an amazing system for nurturing young beings that's just awe-inspiring to contemplate. It's also a delicious and beautiful form of

animal protein that no animal had to die for.

When Easter comes around, people steam their homes with vinegar in order to re-create the pretty colors that come naturally from a diverse set of hens. We backyard hen keepers, aka flocksters, understand the excitement. There is something deeply captivating about a diverse basket of eggs.

That's why for the flockster, every day is like Easter. It's extra-true if the flock includes a blue egg layer, like an Araucana or an Ameraucana, and you can have a mix of white, brown and

blue eggs. In the company of blues the brown eggs look reddish, and your basket looks red, white and blue.

Perhaps the best thing about having chickens is not having a compost pile, or not worrying about not having a compost pile. The chickens eat everything. The girls cluck pleasantly as they convert soggy noodles, meat scraps, old greens and browned bananas into brunch, and close the loop between your kitchen, garden and surrounding ecosystem.

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ARI LEVAUX

Eggs dyed with black tea (brown), turmeric (yellow) and pea flower (blue) sit in a basket.

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STELLA FONG PHOTOS

In white cursive writing, “Kal’s Chicken” labels the heart of the restaurant where the major work is done at Kal’s Chicken Coop – the kitchen and prep area. The main dining room has been refashioned from the Asian-themed decor of JP Kitchen to a now brighter farm vibe.



Where once hung a pair of large red chop sticks, a photo playing on Grant Wood’s American Gothic painting parodying American culture is on display. Calvin Tang and his wife Kiki are the main characters in the photo holding a pitchfork and a chicken.

Plates

From C1

are processed for tenders. The chicken goes through brining. They are dipped in buttermilk and coated with a dry mix of cornstarch, flour and salt flavored with paprika and onion powder.

Tang and his staff peel and cut up about 50 to 75 pounds of potatoes a day. Using Russet potatoes, the hand-punched batons are blanched to tender in vinegar and water, and fried. Then they are held and fried again to order.

I step into Kal’s Chicken Coop this noon hour to grab something to take home. The entry-foyer, once bordered by orderly dark wood slats reminiscent of an Asian sanctuary has been replaced with white farm fencing. I walk right past a bright yellow to-go chicken coop, built by Jeremy Engebretson, fellow chef friend, which holds the readied orders for pickup.

From the menu on the wall, I order a teriyaki chicken sandwich with grilled chicken, grilled pineapple, Swiss cheese, onion,

and house-made teriyaki sauce, and a small order of chicken tenders with four pieces accompanied with Kal’s tender sauce and honey mustard.

After Jessica Thompson takes my order, I wait at the long table by the window. Where once hung a pair of large red chop sticks, a photo playing on Grant Wood’s American Gothic painting parodying American culture dominates the wall. Calvin and his wife Kiki are the main characters in the photo holding a pitchfork and a chicken.

Tang said of the food at Kal’s Chicken Coop, “It’s homemade food cooked to order. It’s common food, freshly made with some heart going into it.”

“I wanted to be ahead of the game,” he added, as fast-food institutions have recently debuted fried chicken sandwiches.

I take my order home in a brown paper bag sealed with a long piece of red tape. Inside two boxes lined with red and white checkered paper hold a sandwich, and four large candy bar sized tenders. The toasted potato bun holding the grilled teriyaki chicken showcases the symmetrical grill marks on the pineapple-



Four generous-sized chicken strips come with the small order of chicken tenders. For dipping, honey mustard and Kal’s tender sauce are two options out of six. Kal’s tender sauce is a mixture of ketchup, mayonnaise and lemon juice.

I bite into an easy-eating sandwich that was mouthwateringly tender. In the future I would ask for more of the savory and sweet sauce on the side.

Even after being sealed in the container for nearly half an hour, a still-crispy coating encased the moist meat. Kal’s tender sauce, a concoction of ketchup, mayonnaise and lemon juice, offered sentiments of comfort.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kal’s Chicken Coop demonstrates how the efforts of reinvention and restarting take diners into a new chapter of eating.

Stella Fong, author of ‘Historic Restaurants of Billings and Billings Food’ hosts ‘Flavors Under the Big Sky: Celebrating the Bounty of the Region’ for Yellowstone Public Radio.



TheLastBestPlates.com is a digital destination that serves up Montana’s tasty food, travel and culture stories ... one bite at a time.

Patent

From C1

Marion Cunningham’s Raised Waffles

Makes 8 to 10 double waffles (16 to 20 4-inch squares)

This special waffle recipe is Marion Cunningham’s adaptation of “Raised Waffles” from the 1896 Fannie Farmer Cookbook. It’s sensational! You make the batter the night before, and in the morning you beat in a couple of eggs and a little baking soda. The waffles bake up crispy on the outside and nice and tender on the inside. The batter keeps for several days in the refrigerator.

Waffles are not just for breakfast. These particular waffles are terrific for supper, paired with creamed chicken and vegetables.

- ½ cup warm water
- 1 package (2 ¼ teaspoons) active dry yeast
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 cups whole milk, heated to just warm
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- 2 cups (10 ounces) unbleached all-purpose flour (measure by dipping 1-cup dry measure into flour, fill to overflowing, and level off with a straight edge)
- 2 large eggs
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda

1. Put the water into a large mixing bowl (at least 3-quarts) and add the yeast and sugar. Let stand 5 to 10 minutes until the yeast is dissolved and foamy.

2. Add the milk, melted butter, salt, and flour, and whisk well until smooth. The batter will be thin. Cover tightly and leave at room temperature overnight.

3. Preheat your waffle iron. Whisk the eggs and baking soda into the batter well. You’ll have about 5 cups. Bake waffles until golden brown and crisp.

Creamed Chicken with Waffles

Makes 4 servings

You can either roast a chicken for this dish or buy a rotisserie chicken. You’ll need 3 cups of cooked diced chicken for this recipe. Creamed chicken is nothing more than chicken enveloped in a white sauce. Carrots and peas are delicious with it. I also like to add a bit of mustard, but you could substitute curry powder or just season the sauce with the salt and pepper.

Vegetables

- 1 cup diced peeled carrots (¼-inch dice)
- 1 cup frozen peas

Cream Sauce

- 2 ¼ cups whole milk
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¾ cup chicken broth
- 6 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup unbleached all-purpose flour
- 1 ¼ teaspoons salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard or 1 teaspoon curry powder

Chicken and Garnish

- 3 cups cooked diced chicken
- 4 tablespoons thinly sliced green onions
- Cooked waffles (8 squares) kept hot in a 200-degree oven

1. Cook the vegetables first. Bring a quart of water to the boil in a medium saucepan. Add the carrots and cook 5 minutes, until just tender. Turn off the heat and add the frozen peas. After 1 minute, drain the vegetables and set them aside.

2. Set a large wire cooling rack onto a large rimmed baking sheet. Put your set-up in the oven and turn the oven on to 200 degrees. Bake the waffles. You’ll need 8 squares for four servings. Place them on the wire rack as soon as you take them out of the waffle iron. They’ll stay hot and crisp in the oven while you make the creamed chicken.

3. For the cream sauce, heat the milk, cream and chicken broth in a medium saucepan over medium heat until very hot but not quite boiling. While the liquid is heating, melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. When bubbly, add the flour and cook, stirring constantly with a wire whisk, for 2 minutes. It’s okay if the roux turns a light brown.

4. Take the pan off the heat and pour in the hot liquid all at once. Still off heat, whisk the liquid and cooked flour vigorously to combine them well.

5. Return the pan to medium heat and cook, stirring with the whisk at a leisurely pace, until the sauce boils and thickens into a cream sauce, about 5 minutes. Whisk in the salt and pepper and the mustard or curry powder, if using, and cook a half-minute more. Reduce the heat to low, stir in the cooked chicken, carrots, and peas, and heat until piping hot.

6. Spoon about ½ cup of the creamed chicken over each hot waffle – 2 square waffles per diner – and sprinkle the scalions on top. Serve right away.

Greg Patent is a James Beard Award-winning cookbook author for “Baking in America,” a food journalist, blogger, and radio co-host for “The Food Guys” on Montana Public Radio. Please visit his blog, www.thebakingwizard.com, and follow him on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

LeVaux

From C1

This time of year, there is something soothing and invigorating about the sound of spring chickens scratching in the dirt. They have a zest for life that is contagious. After a long winter, I let the hens run around the entire back yard, including the garden. They aerate the top layer of soil with their pecks and claws, like scratching the earth’s head after a long sleep, at the beginning of a big day.

Last fall my flock had dwindled down to just two golden buff Orpington hens, ages 2 and 8, both named Annabelle, only one of whom was still laying. At least they had each other through the winter, but by spring the amount of organic material in the chicken yard had pulled ahead of what the girls could eat. They needed reinforcements, and thanks to a deal that went down in a parking lot near the bountiful Missoula Winter Market the other week, they got them, from the back of an old Ram long bed owned by a market vendor whose eggs I’d been buying a lot of lately since my flock dwindled.

The timing of this transaction had been planned weeks

ahead of time, from when the baby chicks were barely a month old. We had to wait until they were big enough to not get pecked apart by the old hens, and old enough to be distinguished from the roosters, which we could not accommodate. But they could not be too big, else they in turn would bully the senior hens.

At home, I set my box of boisterous cargo in the chicken yard and took off the lid. A single feathered head popped up like a periscope to survey the new digs. One by one they hopped out. After a polite, deferential period of about 30 seconds, the new chickens quickly made themselves at home. They knew exactly what to do in a chicken yard, and were soon running around like juvenile delinquents, indifferent to the concerned old hens watching from the corner, occasionally squawking beseechingly in my general direction.

By the time evening fell, the new girls had all found their way into the coop and were snuggled up on perches alongside the old girls. The flock merger was complete. And thus, the hen party doesn’t ever have to end, as long as you replenish the flock and rebuild the chicken coop if it burns down (long story). But if chicken farming is not your

thing, or you don’t have the yard space, extra bandwidth or desire to take care of living, eating, pooping beings, you certainly don’t have to. By all means support your local chicken farmer.

And since my hens are not yet big enough to lay their spectrum of eggs, I’ll be coloring them by soaking them in strong teas made from intensely colored natural materials, some of which I found around the house and some I ordered online.

Natural dyes give a more “realistic” look to the eggs, making them look like magical treasures from the nest of some fabulous bird, rather than perfect cookie cutter eggs with the flawless, airbrushed finish of synthetic dyes.

My favorite materials for “tea dyed” eggs are turmeric, black tea, and dried pea flower, which is easy to find online and makes a bright indigo color.

Tea Dyed Eggs

The eggs in the photo were dyed with black tea (brown), turmeric (yellow) and pea flower (blue). Like making tea, the concept is always the same regardless of which type of leaves, but each person has different tools in their kitchen and a personal preference on how strong they like their tea.

The depth of color is dependent on how much material you use, and how

long you let the eggs “steep.” Some of the eggs pictured have lighter shades from less time steeping.

If you want to eat the eggs, go for it. Just keep them refrigerated as they steep.

- 6 white eggs
- 1 quart water
- 1 cup vinegar (or more, which might help depending on the material)
- Choice of colorant:
 - 1 cup powdered turmeric
 - ¼ cup pea flower
 - 3 bags black tea

Place the water, vinegar and eggs in a pot over medium heat. Add the dye materials and bring to a boil. Turn down to a simmer, and simmer for 10 minutes. Turn it off and let the eggs steep until they reach the desired hue. For the darkest shades you see on the plate, let them sit overnight (in the fridge, if you plan to eat them).

Remove them very gingerly and set on a rack to dry. When the coating is still wet it can rub off, leaving a lighter shade below like an old coat of paint. Once completely dry they can be handled more easily.

Ari LeVaux writes Flash in the Pan, a syndicated weekly food column carried in more than 60 newspapers nationwide. Though his audience is national, he says he “always writes about Montana. Usually.”