

RESTAURANT REVIEW 40 September 28 2016

The Battle of Maplewood Fried Chicken



By John Hoffmann

THE BATTLE OF MAPLEWOOD FRIED CHICKEN: Much to our surprise Porter's Fried Chicken on Big Bend Blvd. just north of the Maplewood/ Shrewsbury/Webster Groves border has been in business 40 years. It is located in a small strip center in between a Laundromat and a pool hall.

We were there on a Wednesday night at 8 PM an hour before closing time. When we arrived there was a family in the dining area and two people waiting on takeout orders. Before our food arrived the dad and two kids who were at a table left. Suddenly we were the only inside diners. But that did not mean the place was empty. There was a steady stream of people coming in to pick up go orders.



There is a limited type of table service. You walk up to the counter and place your order. You get your own beverages and there is no booze for sale. When the food is ready the counter person will deliver it to your table. Don't expect any of that fancy stuff like dishes or silver ware. It arrives in a Styrofoam tray with a plastic spork and knife.



I ordered the 2-piece chicken dinner with two sides and a roll (\$5.49). My wife ordered the two-piece fried cod dinner with two sides and a roll. (\$6.49)



We cut one piece of cod in half and using our rolls we created "fish sliders. They were very good. The fish was just right. The fry cook was on his game.

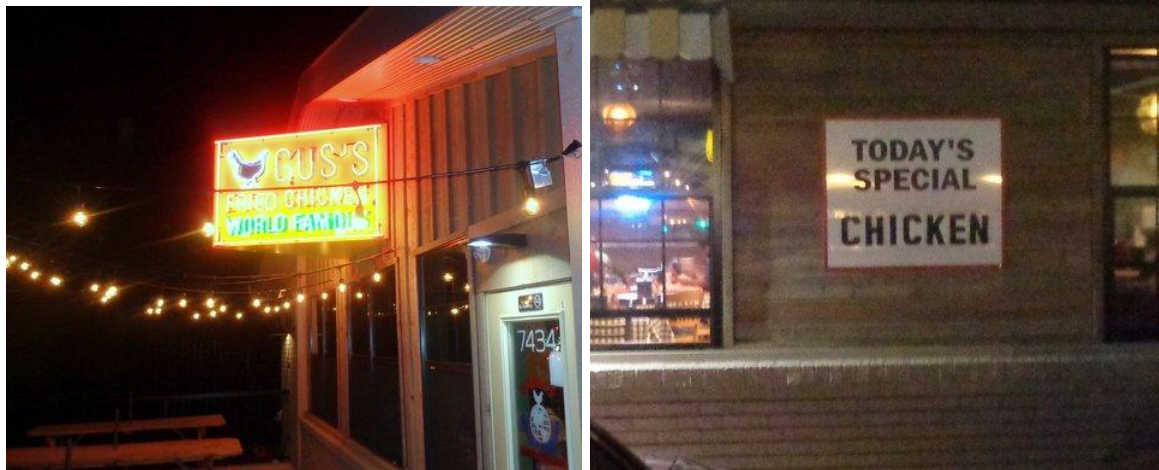
I cut two bites off my chicken breast and while I momentarily looked away, my wife took the rest (and most) of the breast. From what I tasted it was very good. My wife said the same thing.

The mash potatoes and gravy were okay, but the Cole Slaw was great. It is made fresh on the premises. It reminded me of the KFC slaw from 40 years ago. It was sweet and creamy.

Okay it was not like eating anywhere in West County, including at a Sonic or Culver's. But it was very reasonably priced and everything was good and some things were beyond good. My dinner was under \$6 counting tax!

The second contestant in the Battle of Maplewood Fried Chicken was Gus's.

Gus's Fried Chicken moved into the building that was originally a Burger Chef back in the 1960s. It is located just east of Big Bend on Manchester Road.



Gus's is part of a very popular fried chicken restaurant in Memphis. When it opened in Maplewood there were long waits to just get in the door. That appears to be over. It is open from 11 am to 9 pm and 10 pm on the weekends. You have to laugh when you see the sign on the wall near the main door that proclaims "Today's Special CHICKEN." Other than sides, the only item on the menu is chicken. But they do have specials.

The interior is much more inviting than Porter's. When we arrived at 7:35 on a Wednesday night we were told to just pick any table we liked.

The place was not that crowded, but just like Porter's there was a steady stream of people coming in to pick up go-orders. However, in West County after 7:30 or so, many restaurants have seen the peak of their dinner hour. That was not the case at Gus's.

From 7:45 to 8:30 more and more people kept showing up. The place was 3/4 s full when we left at 8:30. It reminded me of being back on the east coast, where due to heavy traffic, rush hour was not over until 7 or 7:30 and restaurants were busy until 9 o'clock.

Plus it was clear we were not in West County. Regular people of different backgrounds were walking through the door all evening. The customers not only included different racial backgrounds, but also tall thin people, short fat people plus young and old. The place had a great friendly urban feel to it.



Most of these tables were full by 8:15.

The building was originally a Burger Chef, but there is nothing Fast Food about it. Your food is cooked to order. Expect a 20 wait for your order. The other thing to be aware of, just like Porter's the chicken arrives hot. The difference is that all the chicken is spicy. It isn't drink three glasses of water spicy, but still if you like to just put a little salt on the chicken, this is not a place for you.

My wife ordered a two piece white meat dinner (\$8.70) with a side baked beans and a side of fried okra (50-cent up charge for the Okra).

I was going to get the 3-piece chicken tenders for \$9.75. Our waitress stopped me and said the special of day would be better for me. (I'm guessing because I'm fat.) The special was a 5-piece chicken tender dinner for \$9.99. I went with the special. The tenders were so big I only ate three that night and had the two others for breakfast the next day. The chicken seemed to be really extra spicy at breakfast.

I asked for our waitress to be our consultant. She said her favorite side was the Mac and Cheese. She added that the Potato Salad was made fresh on the premises as was the Cole Slaw. I went with the Potato Salad and Cole Slaw plus added a Mac and Cheese for my wife and I to try.



All the fried chicken comes out crispy. While the place has charming tablecloths and that intentional low budget look of different styles of chairs at the tables, it did have other things in common with Porter's. Food is served on Styrofoam and you get a plastic fork and knife. The fork was an upgrade from the spork.

My wife liked the chicken, but preferred Porter's from a week earlier. She liked the beans and really liked the Okra. I tried the beans and wasn't impressed.



My tenders were huge. However, besides being hot, they were a little dry. The honey-mustard dipping sauce came in handy. The potato salad and Cole Slaw were great. The first couple of bites of the Mac and Cheese were good, but after the third and fourth it started to taste average at best. My wife agreed.

We were too full to try the pies.

Porter's had the rolls plus fish and catfish nuggets so if you are Catholic you can put it on your Friday Lent list. We preferred the chicken at Porters. But, we really liked the charm of the inside of Gus's.

In Chesterfield Smitty's Wednesday fried chicken is better than both of these places. However, you can only get fried chicken on Wednesday's at Smitty's. But, Smitty's hand breaded chicken tenders are available 7-days a week. I preferred them even to the giant ones at Gus's.

