

What have we learned?

Well, I think I've learned that fried chicken is hard to screw up. Even the spots that aren't my top spots are still good. I'd eat at almost all of these again, no problem. Even the "bad" spots are totally fine. It's fried chicken! It's really difficult to make bad fried chicken, ya know? Calgary has good spots, and I'd recommend more than I'd steer you away from. So good on everyone for that!

TL;DR? You just want my top list? This is it, what I deem the best of the bunch:

Classic/southern-fried:

Cluck and Cleaver (probably #1 for quality)

Chicken-on-the-way (most comforting, most frequency)

Korean/Asian

bb.q chicken (Foodwise, this one)

Wow Chicken (Fries-wise, vibes-wise)

Corporate Chains

Jollibee (Gotta travel for it, tho)

Mary Brown's (Actually, decent stuff)

Nashville/Spicy

Flirty Bird (Actually the spiciest, if you can handle it)

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26. Jollibee

Address too far to bother

Jollibee spicy chicken is really good. Like really good. I know, this will sound crazy, after just hitting all these Nashville joints, but it could be the legit spiciest too. Each piece has a little "SPICY" warning flag as a pre-emptive warning to tell you that "Yo, for real, this is some spicy stuff. And it's different too, the Filipino spice, it hits your tastebuds different. Some folks rate Jollibee as a above medium spiciness, but that's totally false, this spiciness blew me away. Probably have said this before, but could be my favourite. I will absolutely NOT recommend any of the rest of the menu (that ketchupy mess of a spaghetti can take a hike!) but this spicy chicken could be top chicken. And if we're talking chains, I feel Jollibee is the easily top spot in my books.

(I've gone back a few times since writing this, and I fear they may have nerfed the spiciness, which is something of a bummer. So more manageable, but less to get excited about - probably still remains top chain, tho)

Vibe: Feel's oddly 90's for being a relatively new chain here. I can't hate on a plastic booth.

Must-avoid side: Look, the pineapple juice as the standard drink is just weird. Hard no. That's the stuff I drain out of my fruit cocktail.

~~THE FRIED CHICKEN DISTRICT~~

(Reviewing every single fried chicken restaurant in Central Calgary, just because)

~~Food eaten by: Kevin Stebner~~

I hereby rename Calgary's Beltline area as "The Fried Chicken District". This is a weirdly new phenomena, but central Calgary has become one of the most hotly contested zones for fried chicken dominance. By my count, there are around 25 restaurants (more included) that specialise in fried chicken within a few kilometres from each other. With that over abundance of spots, how is one to know which ones are the good ones? Well, my friend... I have endeavoured to answer that question for you. Yes, that's right - I've tried every fried chicken spot in The Chicken District (formerly known as the Central/Beltline area).

Look. I'm trying to be exhaustive. And yes, I know there's a bunch of other pubs and restaurants in The District that serve up some good birds. I focused on the specialists, those that have chicken as their main, or chicken in the name. (Crack Macs did up the wing night special, after all). Even now, after 20+ chicken places reviewed, I can never be sure I'm actually done - as every time I'd thought I'd tried every spot, I would find out ANOTHER one has popped up, thus extending the project further. But ultimately I tried to try them all, and here's the result of all those eats. I like fried chicken. I know you do as well.

This publication was inspired by the "Hamilton Sub Register" - reviewing all the sub spots in the city of Hamilton, ON. That zine rocks. Shout out to them and all other city-wide food reviews out there.

Love
Kevin

27. Church's Texas Chicken

Way, way to far to bother

Geez, we're basically in Airdrie now. I'm way out of the district here, but I figure for thoroughness, might as well hit the chains. I'm sure it'll be in the district at some point. But like.... who the hell asked for this place? Legit, this is just a more boring Popeye's. I got the spicy, and it was NOT spicy in the slightest. For a quick drive through meal, yeah, it's fine. Whatever. I'm just mad I drove this far up for something so mediocre. If this is Texas style chicken, boy, these Texan's are doing some whack-ass chicken. Don't know who this is for. C-grade Popeyes, that's all it is.

BONUS CONTENT!! EXCURSIONS:

25. K-Town Fried Chicken

919 Centre St NW

A little out of the way from The District, but because K-Town's take on Korean style chicken has made it a destination, I had to include it regardless. Many in town rate this as their top spot, so it had to be included as a destination. This style of Korean fried chicken isn't always my go-to, but K-Town going wild with the unique combos of toppings and sauces more than makes up for any misgivings. And the topping combos are pretty inventive. Yeah, I'll take cilantro on mine, sure. Solid.

Vibe: Fun place to chill, and they'll pair your meal with a beer, if you're into that.

Must-try side: Truffle & Asiago fries, good for my morale, bad for my breath.

24. 4corners Wingstop

112 4 Ave SW (inside the Ampersand building)

Excited to have found this Jamaican jerk-style wings tucked away in this skyscraper downtown. This is a little area of food trucks parked inside the side lobby of the building. They clearly cater to downtown business people, and have their hours set accordingly, and thus it isn't that easy to get there at a convenient time. So that's pretty lame. Gotta say though, flavours were good, but the prices were pretty high for the quantity of food you got. Kinda not worth it, in that sense. Just nice to have a different take on chicken, especially with the influx of Korean spots, Jamaican style feels less common.

Vibe: Food truck inside parked inside the lobby of a corporate nightmare. Kinda weird.

22. Burnin' Bird

606 17 Ave SW

I've been back a couple times just to make sure I'm feelin the way I'm feelin'. I honestly appreciate that they only have 3 things on the menu. "We do these 3 things and that's all we need" - no analysis paralysis when ordering here. Will admit that the "medium" spice is a little more than expected, but things could get gnarly if you were trying to act tough. The breading on the chicken is just different than everywhere else, almost like it's not breaded, it's *coated* in the spices and all that. Maybe that's a good thing for some, as you don't have a lot of unnecessary breading there if you want just the heat and the chicken, but for me, I missed some of that crispiness, ya know? Solid heat.

Vibe: Kinda more take-out-y vibe cashing in on all the 17th patio bar run off.

CLASSIC (SOUTHERN) FRIED:

1. Chicken-on-the-Way

1443 Kensington Rd NW

Starting off strong with what has got to be considered THE ONE. The long-running, legendary staple in Calgary, there's just something about Chicken-on-the-Way that keeps me coming back: the old school vibe, the chicken statue that greets you outside (often in a changing costume), the presentation, and the grease! The chicken is probably the greasiest around (it's likely you'll catch the staff shovelling in a mound of fat into the fryers), but that greasiness is OH SO GOOD. Is it the best spot? Probably not. Is it the one I end up going to most often? Probably, yeah. The comfort that Chicken on the Way brings can't be beat. One truly pities the staff though, always seemingly stressed out, trapped in the unending Sisyphean task of perpetually assembling chicken boxes.

Vibes: Among the best of the bunch. Old-school and greasy. Must-try side: The corn fritters, obviously.

3. Monster Chicken & Wings

1040 12 Ave SW

You might have seen this spot by a few other names over the past few years (this is the third name to my recollection in just a few years)(and I think it's still listed as Papito's on some places), but regardless of what it's been called it's been serving up some birds. The menu is a bit overwhelming as there's a lot to choose from, with burgers, and sandwiches on top of everything else. The fried chicken was a basic breaded number, and I thought it was pretty good. No bells or whistles, just a breaded fried chicken. The spot kind of gives me a vibe of a community hockey rink concession, and for me, that's definitely a good thing. Decent spot.

Vibe: Menu that I would deem as too vast, but vibes like a hockey rink concession, of which I am ok with.

2. Cluck N Cleaver

1511 14 St SW

Nestled in the heart of the Fried Chicken District, located in the building that once housed beloved all ages venue ComRad Sound (for the Calgary punk history heads), Cluck & Cleaver is considered by most to be the top spot in Calgary. Could be, could be. They proudly display their user awards on the walls to attest to that. The batter has a nice spritz of black pepper in there, and it's real good. I end up going here quite a bit, as it's an easy one for everyone to agree on, nothing too weird for an actually good version of a KFC-styled fare. I think many folk will tell you this is the spot to go, and I wouldn't be mad at anyone who said this is their favourite of the bunch.

Vibe: Nowhere to sit or anything, but the sodas are top-notch and the old KFC collectibles rock, too.

Must-try side: Yo, the roast potatoes with the chicken drippings is the thing.

23. Nim's Fried Chicken

1415 17 Ave

Even as I'm proving to be a lightweight for Nashville spiciness, I found this one to be pretty tolerable. The medium was a medium. Definitely happy with the portions, as this was a pretty decent tender, here. I was pretty upset that they put sweet pickles in there, and the sweet pickle juice got in my slaw and ruined the whole slaw. Wasn't into that. Solid tenders though!

Vibe: Pure middle of the road. Not mad at it.

Side: Hey, there's waffle-cut fries, those are fun!

4. Great Canadian Pizza & Fried Chicken

921 7 Ave SW

I really did not intend to divvy out bad reviews, I'm a good-natured fried chicken lover after all, but I did not have a good meal when I was here. Mostly, I think the whole thing was under the heat lamp a little too long. Because even on a different night, this might have been ok. Definitely the kind of spot you go to after a show and grab a quick slice or something - and the fried chicken, I'm guessing, just isn't the priority. And after all these excellent chickens I've been experiencing, I think I'm now in a different echelon of expectation. I ordered the 4-piece meal and I got 4 drum sticks. Like, that would have been my order when I was 7 years old, but seriously, come on now! Put a thigh in there or something.

Vibe: Late-night vibe when you just need to fill the hole in your gut.

Side: Honestly... just get a slice instead.

NASHVILLE & SPICY:

21. Flirty Bird Nashville Hot Chicken

1919 4 St SW (Mission)

314 10 St NW (Kensington)

There's more on the outskirts, too

Ok, I'm on board! With the influx of Korean style hitting the district like a wave, it's great to also see some Nashville joints coming in. Flirty Bird seems to have been expanding like crazy, they're popping up in every neighbourhood. This Nashville stuff is so good. Just spicy and delicious. You can set your level of spiciness, and even the medium is beyond what I think most would term a "medium" level of spice. I'm proving to be a lightweight for this style, as I tried it again recently thinking I'm a tough guy, went past the medium, and ended up having to chug some milk after. I actually really appreciate that they only have like 2 things. Just do it right and that's all you need. Steer clear if you're affected by spice (it's no joke), but if you can handle the heat, it's a good one.

Vibe: Feels legit, and that's a good feeling.

20. Calgary Co-op Midtown Food Centre

1130 11 Ave SW

My home grocery store, and they have fried chicken in the deli too. Didn't have high expectations, and my meagre expectations were dead on. By no means *bad*, just not great in any sense. It's like... under the hot lamp, even if it was fresh outta the fryer, it would feel like it's been under the heat lamp the whole time, ya know? I know grocery delis are a thing for some people, but I don't think the fried chicken is where they excel. Pass for me.

Vibe: Pretty standard grocery, I was a big fan of the house facade inside, but they seem to be reno-ing that out. Bummer, that.

Side: Dude, just go to the chip aisle and buy some Guac Ariba's instead.

18. 7-11

435 4 Ave SW

Yeah, we're really doing this. When I said we're doing every downtown chicken, I meant it. The chicken here is EXACTLY what you'd expect. So yes, it's *fine*. The clerks seemed to be pretty up on when these were flash fried, so that was at least encouraging, I have to say. Quality is the exact same as a chicken finger from the frozen food section of the grocery store that you'd serve up for, say... a Super Bowl party or whatever. So not brutal by any means, but you gotta be pretty hungry (or at least in a *mood*) for this to taste great (and if you're in that mood, a taquito might be calling your name, as well). If you're up at 1 am and need some hot food to fill a hole in your gut, you could certainly do worse. But, you know you could certainly do a lot better, too. Just get a Slurpee and you'll be happier.

Vibe: Perpetual sticky floors, you know the deal.

5. Strip Joint

312 3 St SE

Without a doubt, the most instagrammable chicken spot in Calgary, for food and decor both. They're really leaning into the namesake, as the entrance feels a little skuzzy going in, but inside it's full fluorescent (lights and colour scheme) vibrance. Honestly, the vibe is great. Think Barbie movie decor. Food is some fun amalgams too, my pickle chicken had dill weed, dill pickles, and dill pickle chips as toppings, the fritter street corn things had crushed up Flamin' Hots on it. Gimmickry aside, the chicken strips themselves were pretty good, moist and a really good batter. You're definitely paying way too much for a meal, but if you need to insta document something fun, this is a hot spot for that.

Vibe: Truly dope vibe - Late 80's dream dinner mixed with a sleazy, yet family friendly peelers.

Side: Those elotes were fun and tasty.

7. I M Chicken

1330 15 Ave SW

Very new joint with a good vibe that continues the Korean tendency to cover everything in wild toppings. Personally, I cannot get down with the "prinkle" flavour but many swear it's the best of the bunch, so take their word for it!. The basic fried was really good though. I like the Korean style of not quite fingers, not quite tenders, just chunks (likely thighs?) fried up - great for dipping, great for snackin', totally a good way to go. I liked it.

Vibes: Very earnest spot. Kinda mostly take-away.

KOREAN (and adjacent):

6. WOW Chicken

324 10 St NW (Kensington)

Could have been my personal top pick for Korean-style fried chicken? Big fan of Wow here. The chicken itself is solid - usually I'll opt for the tenders that you dip in a small array of sauces. But the Bulgogi fries (my god!) take Wow to another level. It's delicious meat salt. I know this is supposed to be a chicken review, and praising the fries may be felt as a side-stepped damnation on the chicken, but don't take it as such. Just the meal as a whole, I guarantee you'll be pleased.

Vibes: The endless K-pop videos blaring on the screens make it a very fun place to immerse yourself in, and a fun one in which to bring friends.

Must-try side: Bulgogi fries are out of this world! Seriously. The fries.

8. Ogam

1324 10 Ave SW

~~This spot really takes me back to when I lived in Korea, as Ogam serves up some very accurate Korean style fried chicken, and this is exactly what it's like. Personally, though, I find this style to be a little basic and mild, so you'll definitely have to get wild with the sauce. Kinda perplexed by the unabashed love Ogam gets, it is pretty good, but I feel you'll find a superior spot when you look elsewhere.~~

(This location closed down. This location is a Thai place now. Looks like I was right all along...)

Vibe: Very authentic to chicken places in Korea, take that how you will.

19. Mary Brown's Chicken

425 10 St NW

Was not expecting to be impressed with Mary Brown's, if I'm being 100. Nothing about the branding, ads, or even word-of-mouth has told me anything about needing to check out Mary Brown's at all. But truth be told, (if we're not including Jollibee, as it's outside The District) I think Mary Brown's is actually the best chain. I can't believe it either, but it's true!

Like... it's almost what I remember KFC being. Batter is good and crispy. Original was flavourful, spicy had a little something in there, so that was nice. All around, pleasantly surprised.

Vibe: I don't know who they're trying to appeal to. The whole thing is sterile, really. Don't let the blasé vibe deter you.

Side: Never been a fan of wedges ever, but these weren't terrible.

17. Fritou Chicken

436 14 St NW (closed?)

1001 1 St SW

I think I want to like Fritou more than I do, if we're being honest. They kinda just do KFC better, but not that much better, and with everything that's around, I don't know if that's enough anymore. The spot itself though, I like it a lot. It feels like it's a place out of time, a chain that fell out of 1993 and stayed the way it was. But maybe we truly are past this era of restaurant. The chicken was OK. It was just...OK. But you're going to find some superior spots a stone's throw in any direction - but it's better than KFC, so there's that!

Vibe: The vibe itself rules. I love the branding, I love this signage. It feels right.

Side: Look, a thick, salty gravy, I can't say no.

16. KFC

751 3 St SW (CORE shopping centre)

Am I totally misremembering what KFC tasted like? I swear KFC used to be amazing. I have very vivid memories of my dad bringing home a bucket as a treat and it being the best thing in the world. I used to save the skin for last and lap it up. But this... this is not what I remember. Not even good-greasy. It's kinda flavourless, not even that much meat on the bones. Like, wasn't the secret to the 11 herbs and spices supposed to be so closely guarded to CIA-levels of espionage? (White pepper is supposed to be the secret secret ingredient, btw.) Am I in some Mandella Effect dimension where the universe split from a past where KFC was great into a not-good-KFC timeline? This was not great. I'm normally game for any fried chicken, but I think I just found one that's an utter no go. I would have sworn KFC was still pretty good. But I'm wrong. Every other spot in this zine is superior. Go to *any* other one.

Vibes: A true bummer to confront the inaccuracy and let-down of nostalgia. Ennui not recommended.

Must-try side: If it's a KFC that's also part of a Taco Bell then they should have Baja Blast on tap, and at least that rules.

14. Shoebox Fried Chicken

1439 17 Ave SW

I'm on board with the gimmick: your whole meal comes in a shoebox (or an equivalent sized box that's basically a shoebox), and it's pretty fun way to get a meal. I got the Original chicken, and I have to say that next time I'll definitely be getting a saucy one, as the Original needed *something* more. Adequate Korean style. I'm not so sure the food-to-value ratio is quite there, as the equivalent size of meal at, say, Chicken on the Way is at least \$6 less. Went into this one with high expectations, and I don't think they were met.

Side: That one (raisin?) fritter I got was weird, man. Decidedly not corn.

Vibe: The 90's hip-hop 12" singles (that they must have gotten from Melodiya's dollar bin) displayed on the wall is a weird vibe, but I don't hate it.

9. Hankook Fried Chicken

923 6 Ave SW

This one was a pleasant surprise as well. Lots of variety of sauces with the Korean style chicken - there's even a cream sauce one to try. In terms of what restaurants in Korea actually look like, this is by far the most authentic for that vibe.

The lady running it is super friendly, so if you love some very inviting service and, whether due to welcoming vibe or authentic vibe, if this was your favourite spot it would totally be understandable.

Vibe: Super friendly lady running the spot, so if you were all about personality, I could understand this to be your fave.

11. Monga Fried Chicken

303 Centre St S

Taiwanese style. New spot, got this one just in time for publication. In hindsight, of course everywhere has their own style of fried chicken, but I'll admit I was unaware of Taiwanese style. Pretty diverse yet succinct menu. The presentation kinda threw me off. Think like a 12 oz steak sized hunk of fried chicken - and that's it. It's almost like eating a schnitzel by hand. Kinda vibes the way Chinese food is fried, it *feels* more fried, if that makes sense. Flavours were good, just salty and delicious. Finished off my bubble tea way too quickly. You definitely get a big hunk of chicken, so... worth it if you're hungry like the wolf.

Sit-down vibe: Fresh new spot in Chinatown, easy to pull up and sit down.

Must-try side: Deep-fried mushrooms!

10. bb.q Chicken

1436 8 St SW (Beltline)
1104 6 Ave SW (Downtown)

Bb.q is slowly becoming a low-key favourite. I don't see bb.q rated on other lists at all, which is perplexing, because I'm almost thinking it tops the list. I needed to try this place a few times to even speak about it accurately, since there was just a lot going on with the menu. I say that merely because there's some pretty unique chicken flavours offered - like... What's the diff between a Galbi Q, Gangjeong, or Gangnam Style? What flavour is "secret" supposed to be? (I asked, they said it's "a mystery sauce," if you must know). I still don't really know, but I've been trying them all and I have yet to be disappointed. Great saucy ones, great dry ones. Very Korean sauces and spices here. I usually opt for the Black Pepper one and it's loaded, so I'm happy. Very into it. (Update: I think bb.q has become my #1 based on when I'm hungry and don't know what to order, it's bb.q that's been getting the call more than any other).

(They really need to get their website in order though... Different items are available to Skip vs. what's on their own website, and minimum orders, and the one person combo not on there? Make things easy for me bb.q!)

Vibe: Gotta be honest, I don't get the vibe inside, like, New York pub vibe? Don't let that deter you, tho.

Must have side: These chak-chak fries I could eat for days.

12. Chicken Avenue

128 2 Ave SE (Chinatown)

New spot in Chinatown, Korean style, housed where the old WOW Chicken was. I don't know where the WOW went (maybe they moved it all to the Beiseker, AB location?), but it felt kinda the same, K-pop blaring on the TV and all. Look, the chicken here was good. The flavour is good, the breading is good. But - and it might not be fair - but when I ate here, all I could think about was how these fries were NOT bulgogi fries, and kinda tainted the whole thing. I couldn't help but compare to WOW, and I didn't think it stacked up. *Shrug.*

Vibe: Not-quite WOW, and that hurts.

CORPORATE CHAINS:

15. Popeye's

1304 17 Ave SW

Starting us off strong with the chain fried Chicken now, Popeye's finally made its way to Calgary and it's dug in deep. For a chain spot, this good stuff. 17th in particular has been a warzone of fried chicken chains. With the empty KFC across the street, it's kinda easy to see how in the war between KFC and Popeye's, at least on this block, that Popeye's has won. As a whole, all these corporate chains are a little bit of a let down compared to the indie spots, but Popeye's is still decent. At the very least the best of the corporate ones for what's on 17th. Let's be real though, this spicy batter is NOT spicy. If it initially had a Louisiana origin, they've certainly tamed it down as they've spread through the world. Buffalo sauce is necessary.

Sit-down vibe: This spot is super orange, like *too* orange, but it's got a sunken area to eat that you KNOW used to be a Wendy's, so that's cool.

Must-try side: Cajun Fries that kinda taste like McCain's Super Fries, so I can get down.

13. Seoul Fried Chicken

2100 4 St SW

One of the newest spots, down in Mission, and it was a pleasant little surprise from this new joint. Good flavours, decent sides, and a few unique sauces to keep you interested. The cilantro lime was nice. And in terms of value, I think you get quite a lot of food for the cost. So that's a huge plus. Definitely worth it on that front! Warning though: the chicken here gives every impression of being boneless (it's not). Why would I expect that? Well, because every other Korean spot will specify if it's not boneless. So, biting into one of these, before I knew it there was a chicken rib in my throat. I don't think it would have been much more work to make sure there weren't little bones here - maybe I'm griping, because the meal was good - but that was one surprise I could do without. On board, otherwise.

Vibe: Very chill patio for summer, pick-up vibes. Inside was a weird reno zone.