



Fried and gone to heaven

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The OregonianToro Bravo

Fried things/You make my heart sing/You make everything ... groovy/Fried things, I think I love you

With apologies to the Troggs (and their No.1 hit, "Wild Thing," from 1966), anything immersed in a vat of hot oil is bound to be blissful.

The oil surrounds and "boils" its soul mate of the moment, cooking the interior in its own moisture while crisping and browning the exterior. The wee bit of surface oil that remains after proper deep-frying adds a pleasant textural sensation. No wonder it's love at first bite for all but the health-fanatical few.

Leaving the ubiquitous french fry for another day, recent explorations revealed a handful of deep-fried favorites -- some readily recognizable, others a private guilty pleasure until now.

Fried pickles and fried Twinkies at Fire on the Mountain (\$3.95 and \$2.50): The hot-oil artisans may be known for their chicken wings, but these are the secret stars of the menu. Start a meal with pickle spears fried until deep golden and crunchy and served with spicy chipotle mayonnaise. The piquancy of the pickle, the crunch of the

batter coating and the heat of the dip make for a tantalizing triad. To finish, the godmother of preserved packaged pastries emerges from the fryer as a hot and enhanced version of its progenitor, the quasi-cream deep inside a melty-sweet sin of its own. The shuttle-craft-shaped Twinkie is rolled in pancake batter before frying and dusted with powdered sugar afterward. Sick, you say? Hey, at least they use vegetable oil. (4225 N. Interstate Ave., 503-280-9464 and 1706 E. Burnside St., 503-230-9464; www.portlandwings.com)

Deep-fried cheese curds at Corbett Fish House and Hawthorne Fish House (\$7.75): Warning! Molten cheese curds can burn you -- and eating too many can give you a stomachache. But the coated gobs of pre-cheese at these twin fried fish destinations are definitely worth the risk. Adapted from a Wisconsin tradition, Tillamook cheddar cheese curds are chilled to nearly freezing and then coated in rice flour before doing their dance in the deep fryer. Trans-fat-free rice bran oil is used, as if to assuage the guilt of enjoying a crunchy, oozy good time. (5901 S.W. Corbett Ave., 503-246-443, and 4343 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd., 503-548-4434, www.corbettfishhouse.com)

Fried stuffed olives at Firehouse (\$4.50): With a dozen or so per order, these ovoid gems can defuse the deep-fried-food lover's dilemma -- health vs. hedonism -- provided you share them with fellow diners. Large green olives get a bit of pork and chicken liver forcemeat in place of their pits, plus a coating of corn and wheat flour. Salty, extra crunchy because of the corn, with the whisper of meaty protein within, the deep-fried delivery is a perfect pairing for an ice-cold beverage. If ketchup can be categorized as a vegetable, so can these enhanced olives. (711 N.E. Dekum St., 503-954-1702; www.firehousepdx.com)



The OregonianDang's gai hor bai toey

Gai hor bai toey at Dang's Thai Kitchen (\$7): Not every deep-fried delight needs a batter or flour coating. Here, chicken chunks are elaborately wrapped in pandanus leaves. These long, slender green leaves insulate the meat from the oil's intense heat and add their own enchanting vanilla-like aroma to the moist and flavorful result. Unwrapping the leaves to reach the prize within is a worthwhile chore. Dunking each chunk in the accompanying plum sauce is a must. (670 N. State St., Lake Oswego, 503-697-0779)

Chicken kara-age at Biwa (\$8): If the Colonel were still alive, he would be beating a path to Biwa to taste this Japanese bar food version of fried chicken. Boneless chicken chunks are marinated in soy sauce, sake, ginger and green onion, then rolled in wheat and rice flour embellished with curry powder. Post-immersion, the chicken emerges moist inside with a sturdy, light-golden shell. Use the hot mustard and lemon wedge for hot and sour

counterpoints. (215 S.E. Ninth Ave., 503-239-8830; www.biwarestaurant.com)

Onion rings at The Country Cat (\$5): These buttermilk-soaked, shoestring loops of sweet onions -- dredged in seasoned flour before frying -- have become a signature menu item. They arrive at the table in a giant tangled pile of golden goodness. The onion's thin gauge makes them special, adding a pleasingly high ratio of shattery-crust exterior to the allium interior, a big plus for lovers of crunch. The cooks don't short the salt, either, bless their hearts. (7937 S.E. Stark St., 503-408-1414; www.thecountrycat.net)

Oxtail croquettes at Toro Bravo (\$14): Oxtails make the final sacrifice for this deep-fryer hall-of-fame candidate. The rich tail meat is worked easily from the bone after a respectful period in the braising pot. Cinnamon, bay leaf, bittersweet chocolate and a mirepoix -- finely chopped carrot, celery and onion -- lend complexity to the braising brew. The meat is combined with mashed potato and bechamel sauce before the croquettes-in-waiting get the hot oil treatment. Finally, three golden cylinders are served over a splash of oxtail, with a side of punchy chile mayonnaise. (120 N.E. Russell St., 503-281-4464; www.torobravopdx.com)

Ciccioli at Belly Timber (available on charcuterie plate, \$11): This is but one variation on an old Italian dish, originally conceived to use the last scraps of a pig. Here, pork shoulder meat is braised along with a trotter or two for texture. The meat is shredded, then packed into a pan along with some of the braising liquid, pressed, cut into squares, coated with bread crumbs and tossed in the deep fryer. Once the odyssey is done and the ciccioli is ready for tasting, the breading's crunch yields to the melt-in-your-mouth texture of this specially cured meat. The overused word "unctuous" fits this dish perfectly. (3257 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd., 503-235-3277; www.bellytimberrestaurant.com)

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