

## Southern Fried Buttermilk Game Hens with Cream Biscuits

Chef Nancy Oakes  
Boulevard Restaurant

Serves 4

### Buttermilk-Brined Game Hens

2 Cornish game hens  
1 quart buttermilk  
1/4 cup kosher salt  
3 tablespoons lemon juice  
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard  
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme or 1 tablespoon dried  
Safflower or peanut oil for frying

### Flour Coating

4 cups self-rising flour  
2 tablespoons dry mustard (we like Colman's)  
2 teaspoons kosher salt  
2 teaspoons Hungarian paprika

### Cream Biscuits

1 1/2 cups self-rising flour  
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt  
1 tablespoon sugar  
1 cup heavy cream (plus a few tablespoons more if necessary)  
1/3 cup melted butter

**To prepare the game hens**, remove the backbones and cut the hens into 8 pieces: drumsticks, thighs, breasts, and wings. Stir all the brine ingredients together in a large bowl and immerse the game hens. (You can also put the hens in a large zip-lock bag and pour the brine over them.) Refrigerate hens in brine for a minimum of 4 hours and up to 12 hours or overnight.

**To dredge the hens**, stir the flour coating ingredients together in a medium bowl. Have a wire cooling rack or two set up over rimmed baking sheets, making sure they are large enough to accommodate all the hens without touching. Working with one piece at time, remove the hens from the brine allowing the brine to drip back into the bowl or bag, but *don't wipe it off because you want a good amount to create the crust.* leaving a good amount of brine on the piece. Drop it into the flour mixture and turn it to coat well. Place the pieces on the rack so they don't touch. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 4 hours.

**To make the biscuits**, Biscuits can be made ahead, dipped in butter, and refrigerated for up to 6 hours before baking. Just be aware that the longer they sit, the less they'll rise in the oven. You

can also measure out the dry and liquid ingredients in advance and then form and bake the biscuits at the last minute. The recipe for the biscuits makes nine: two per serving and one extra for the cook. Preheat the oven to 425° F. Put the self-rising flour, salt, and sugar into a medium bowl. Using a fork, slowly stir in the cream until the dough just begins to come together. If it feels dry and there are too many pieces falling away, add a little more cream, 1 tablespoon at a time. Once the dough comes together, turn it out on a lightly floured cutting board and pat and shape it with your hands into a 1/2-inch thick square. Cut into 9 squares and dip each square into the melted butter. Place the biscuits on a baking sheet. Bake in the preheated oven for 15 minutes or until lightly golden. Serve hot from the oven.

**To fry the hens**, put enough oil in a large, deep skillet to come up halfway and heat to a temperature of 350° F. Carefully add enough game hen pieces to fit comfortably without crowding, and cook for 4 to 5 minutes on each side or until golden brown. Regulate the heat so that it remains at 350° F as much as possible. Remove the fried hens to a baking sheet lined with paper towels and keep warm in a 250° F oven while you fry the remaining pieces.

### **Shopping & Kitchen Notes**

- We prefer fresh game hens to frozen mass-marketed birds, but the buttermilk and crispy coating will make even frozen ones taste good. Game hens usually average 1 1/2 to 2 pounds and a half bird per person is plenty filling, particularly if you go the whole route and serve the biscuits with the mashed potato gravy. Plan on defrosting frozen hens overnight in the refrigerator.
- Self-rising flour has baking powder and salt already added and in addition to saving a little time measuring out those ingredients, we find it guarantees our biscuits and shortcakes a consistent “lift,” and contributes lightness to the flour coating on the hens. Check the expiration date on the package though, to make sure the baking powder hasn’t lost its oomph.
- There’s a lot of talk these days about good and bad fats and we use safflower and peanut oil exclusively for frying now. Hydrogenated vegetable oil is in our doghouse because of its trans fats. Whatever fat you use, make sure it’s clean and fresh.
- Brining—immersing meats or poultry in a salt solution—not only adds flavor but also improves the texture of the meat and helps prevent moisture loss. The buttermilk, lemon, and mustard in the brine we use here contribute a little tang as well.
- The buttermilk brine combines with the flour coating during dredging to form clumps that get crunchy during frying. Just be careful not to let too many fall into the oil or it will get gummy.
- Call us old-fashioned, but nothing beats cast iron for frying chicken—it retains heat, which helps maintain even oil temperatures, and a well-seasoned cast iron skillet functions like a non-stick pan, preventing even the stickiest coatings from attaching to the bottom.
- Two other secrets to crispy fried chicken: drying the dredged pieces on a rack in the refrigerator, and maintaining an oil temperature of 350° F. If the temperature is too low the coating absorbs too much oil and if it’s too high the coating will burn before the meat is cooked.