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# Fire Up the Grill

The success of KFC's Kentucky Grilled Chicken signals that grilled menu items could be taking over for fried food.  
By Sam Oches



For 15 years, developers at KFC tinkered with the business formula that was established by founder Colonel Sanders, a formula that drove the chain to the top of the chicken quick-service segment: selling fried chicken. Times had changed, and the brand was attempting to respond to consumer demand for a non-fried menu option.

"Our customers have been telling us for a long, long time now that even though they love the taste of the Original Recipe, their lifestyle and changes ... [meant that] we needed to be able to come up with some nonfried options that fit into that," says Doug Hasselo, chief food innovation officer for KFC.

After 15 years of misfiring with options like the Tender Roast and Colonel's Rotisserie Gold, the brand finally found its nonfried salvation in Kentucky Grilled Chicken, which debuted last April. Jonathan Blum, a spokesman for KFC's parent company Yum! Brands, said in January that the new grilled option was projected to earn \$1 billion in sales in its first year on the market.

The success of Kentucky Grilled Chicken is one sign that grilled menu items in the quick-service industry—primarily grilled proteins like chicken, beef, and fish—are starting to cannibalize fried profits that have traditionally driven fast food companies.

## Mixing It Up

According to Mintel Menu Insights, the number of menu items with grilled ingredients at 101 of the top quick-service brands increased 8 percent in Q4 of 2009 beyond the same quarter of 2007. The number of grilled items at those brands was 703 at the end of 2009.

While the growth was not astounding, KFC's success with its Grilled Chicken showed that changing the cooking method could reap big rewards. It also proved that a cooking method like grilling could open other doors.

"Having this platform, our grilling platform, gives us tremendous new food innovation potential," Hasselo says. "Think about the multiple variations of flavors you can do on things like that. It does give us



a whole new platform for growth, and that's exactly what we're seeing, and we're very excited about it."

KFC started to explore that variety in January when it released its Fiery Grilled Wings, a hot-wing version of its Grilled Chicken. Hasselo says consumers can expect "tremendous new flavor variety" from the brand in the near future, as well.

Harry Balzer, vice president and senior analyst with market research firm NPD Group, says the variety grilled proteins create is one of the biggest reasons why consumers respond positively to them.

"If you have something that's very important to you, you know what you look for most often? A new way to have that same thing," he says.

Balzer says that the grilling trend especially has room for growth in chicken because it is the second-most consumed dinner option in America, behind sandwiches. According to NPD estimates, about 23 percent of dinners consumed outside of home are chicken entrées. More than half of that—about 13 percent—is fried chicken.

"Grilling is already in fish, and it's certainly been in steak for a long time," he says. "It plays very well in the chicken market right now, and it may move beyond that to other categories."

While KFC chose to present its new grilled menu innovation in an unadulterated form, grilled ingredients can also be served on a variety of carriers.

The Mintel Menu Insights report on grilled menu items shows that the sandwich category included the most items with grilled ingredients in the 101 quick-service chains surveyed. The segment contained 259 items with grilled ingredients.

Rounding out the top five were the salad (91 items), wrap (71 items), burger (56 items), and pizza (40 items) segments.

### Health Halo

The better-for-you appeal of grilled food seems to be one of the primary drivers of its emerging success in the quick-service industry. The National Restaurant Association's 2010 forecast shows that 73 percent of surveyed adults plan on eating healthier in restaurants this year than they did two years ago, and grilled food offers them a healthier option.

"What happens when you throw a piece of steak or a piece of chicken over a flame? What comes out of a product? The fat," says Steve Carley, CEO of El Pollo Loco.

Carley's chain has specialized in flame-grilled chicken since its inception in 1975, and in January launched a new flame-grilled steak menu line.

A flame-grilled chicken breast at El Pollo Loco checks in at 224 calories, 9 grams of fat, and 3 grams of saturated fat. At KFC, a grilled chicken breast stands at 180 calories, 4 grams of fat, and 1 gram of saturated fat. Meanwhile, a fried Original Recipe chicken breast contains 320 calories, 15 grams of fat, and 3.5 grams of saturated fat.

But Joanne "Dr. Jo" Lichten, author of *Dining Lean*, says that quick serves should be wary of marrying the terms *grilled* and *healthy*. She says that while grilled foods are a viable healthy alternative for quick serves, it's less due to the grilling process and more due to the fact that it is simply not fried.

"Yes, it's leaner, but it also has to do with the type of protein that it is," she says, noting that grilled chicken is healthy because chicken in general is a lean meat. "With hamburgers, whether you put it on the grill or you fry it ... nutritionally it's not going to be a whole lot different."

### Taste of the Grill

Whether or not the healthy element of grilled food is creating positive buzz, Hasselo says that the flavor of KFC's Grilled Chicken is still what draws the customers in the doors.

"You may want to buy healthier kinds of products, but if it doesn't taste good, you're not going to come back," he says. "If you can find great taste, and you can have these other kinds of healthy attributes, it fits nicely into your lifestyle."

Shane Maack, senior executive chef with Gilroy Food & Flavors, a culinary research firm owned by ConAgra Foods, says grilled food has a very attractive flavor profile.

"It's a much better taste, a more refined taste," Maack says. "The caramelization is different; the way that the grill sears the meat, it locks in the flavor, locks in the moistness."

Maack says there are many things a quick serve can do to compliment the flavor of a grilled protein, like using a marinade, which penetrates the meat and is sealed in during the grilling process. But it's important to maintain the grilled-in flavor that the cooking method creates.

"It tastes good, it matches up with the flavors of just about everything that you're going to do. It's really kind of limitless," Maack says.

"You can take a grilled piece of meat, you can shred it, put it into a salad. It gives you a more sophisticated flavor profile, a more developed flavor profile ... than one where you're simply boiling the meat or roasting the meat or rotisserie."

### Many Ways to Grill

There are several options when it comes to achieving the grilled taste and look. Food can be grilled, flame-grilled, char-grilled, steam-grilled, and more, using charcoal grills, infrared grills, flame broilers, and grill pans.

El Pollo Loco's Carley says that quick-service brands should cater to consumers' perception of what grilling is. He says their view of grilling is "backyard, firing up the barbecue, throwing meat over a flame."

After KFC released its Grilled Chicken option, Carley spearheaded an El Pollo Loco marketing campaign that accused KFC of misleading its customers.

"[Their] advertising and communication imply that



PHOTO: JIMMY HARRIS/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



## Ranch 1's Sweet & Spicy Chicken Sandwich

"I wanted to have a fusion feel where there was the classic American sandwich but also have some Asian influences. The sweet and spicy characteristic was something that popped with me. Spicy is always a good profile for consumers, and everyone is so used to the sweet and sour taste in restaurants, I thought if I could change that a bit it was the way to go.

"We grill our chicken to order for customers to see, and this sandwich has a sweet, savory sauce that's not too hot but has a little bit of chili. The chili has a heat kick in the back of your throat that gives it a remembrance factor. That's always great because it makes the consumer come back to you. That's all on a good crusty piece of bread that's also been grilled. The chicken is marinated in house, and all that combined makes a really great sandwich."

**Brett Pluskalowski**

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CHEF, KAHALA CORPORATION

### The Players:

- Grilled all-white chicken
- Toasted semolina bread
- Sweet & spicy sauce
- Marinade
- Lettuce
- Tomato



there are flames involved, but in reality it's boiled in a bag or an oven," he says.

KFC's Hasselo says that while the equipment used at KFC, which is proprietary, is not cooking chicken over an open flame or on top of a typical grill line, the process still accomplishes the grill flavor that customers are looking for.

"What I can tell you is it's a combination of convection cooking and conduction," Hasselo says. "What we do is we have an oven that's fed with some patented features and grill racks that we designed in a very special way that would simulate the experience that you get in your backyard barbecue."

Hasselo adds that there is no firm definition of the term *grilled*.

"All you're doing there is you're basically taking a dry heat format, you're searing the meat or whatever food that you're cooking, [and it] becomes seared or charred in that process," he says.

At UFood Grill, a Boston-based quick serve with eight units, about 20 percent of the menu options are grilled, including chicken, burgers, and steak tips, says vice president of training Chuck Puckett. While the burgers and steak tips are grilled normally atop a grill line, the chicken is grilled using a slightly different method.

"What we try to do is we pre-grill all of our chicken in the morning. We flash-grill it to get the grill marks on the product, and then we chill it rapidly," Puckett says. "As we need it, we pull it out in increments of 12-18 chicken breasts at a time, depending on the volume of the upcoming hour, or the lunch rush or the dinner rush, and we steam it."

### Teaching the Grill

Certainly one challenging aspect of grilling food in the quick-service industry is training. Grilling meat is a sensitive process considering the food-safety hazards that undercooked meats create, and employees must be able to do it correctly.


Puckett, who trains all UFood Grill franchisees and creates the training curriculum for hourly employees, says the grill portion of training at UFood Grill is a long, careful process.

"First and foremost, don't assume that your grill cook knows everything he needs to know about grilling," he says. "Make sure that you're taking the time and the energy to train them how to use the equipment and the tools properly."

Puckett says because of the nature of multitasking quick-service employees, one of the best things a grilling operation can invest in is a timer.

"If employees have to do a couple different tasks at one time, and they have to step away from the grill, the timer's working so that they don't forget about it," he says.

When KFC released its Grilled Chicken, it designated special grill masters—dubbed grill sergeants—at each store to train employees in the art of the grill. Hasselo says the grilling system KFC created motivated employees through its simplicity and quality.

"Its quality, and making it easier for employees to execute, goes a long way," he says. "They're behind it, and they sell it and recommend it to customers and their friends." 

### RIGHT TOOLS

## BARBECUE BY REGION

Each U.S. region has its own flavor preferences in barbecue sauces.



#### • CAROLINA

FLAVORS: Tomato base with mustard, sugar, vinegar, and pepper

#### • TEXAS

FLAVORS: Tomato base with vinegar, spices, and smokiness

#### • MEMPHIS

FLAVORS: Tomato base with vinegar, sugar, and spices

#### • MISSISSIPPI

FLAVORS: Tomato base with vinegar, honey, and spices

#### • KANSAS CITY

FLAVORS: Tomato base with spices and molasses or brown sugar

#### • ST. LOUIS

FLAVORS: Tomato base with vinegar and spices

#### • KENTUCKY

FLAVORS: Tomato base with molasses, spices, and smokiness

#### • LOUISIANA

FLAVORS: Tomato base with cayenne pepper and sugar

SOURCE: FRENCH'S FOODSERVICE, CATTLEMAN'S MASTERS' RESERVE LINE OF REGIONAL BARBECUE SAUCES