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playing a part

chicken thighs earn a starring role on menus

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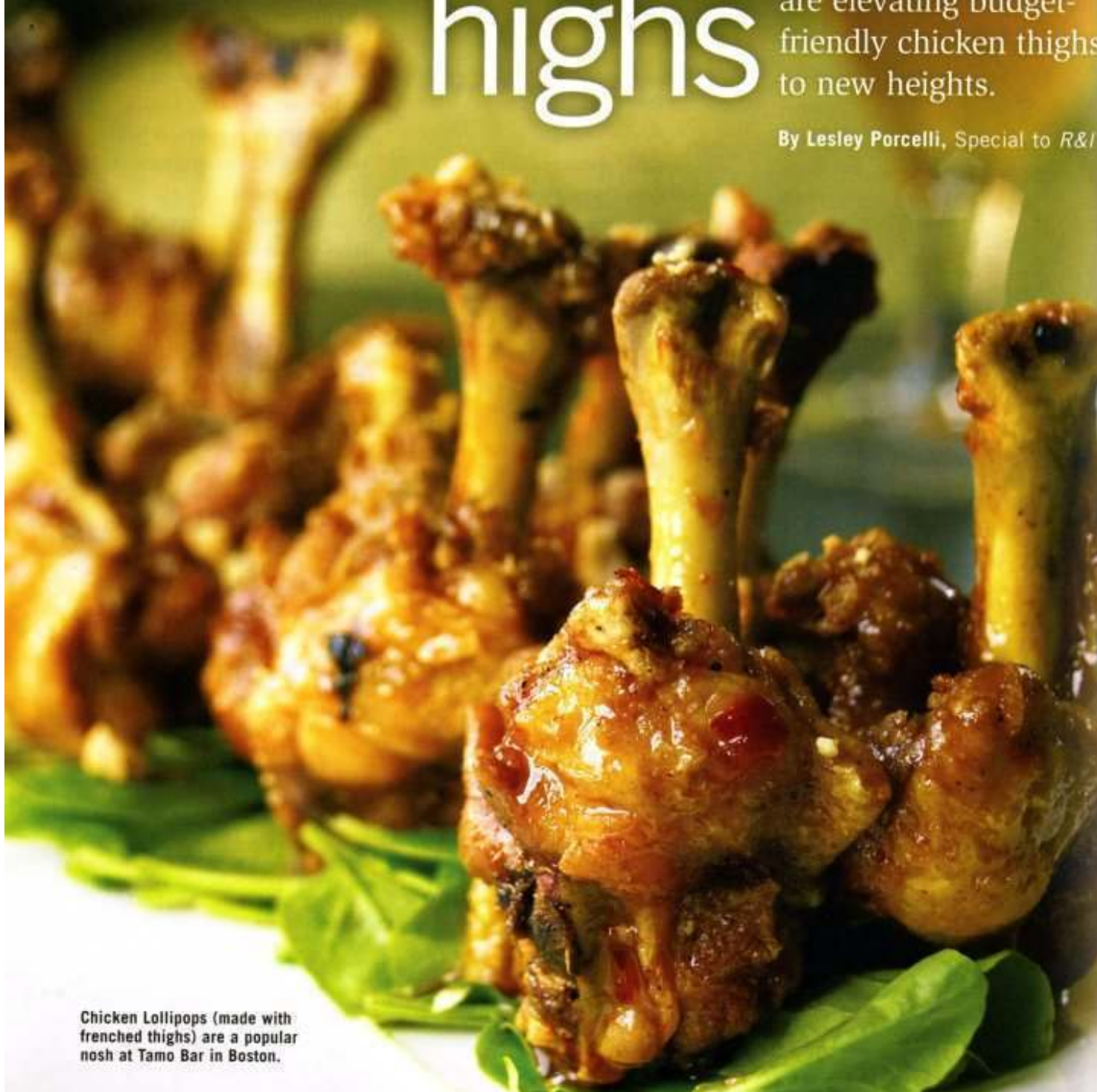
Multiconcept Operators Get to Know Diners on a More-Casual Level

Flexibility is the Key to Carving Out New Catering Opportunities

thigh highs

With clever recipes and a little persistence, chefs are elevating budget-friendly chicken thighs to new heights.

By Lesley Porcelli, Special to R&I



Chicken Lollipops (made with frenched thighs) are a popular nosh at Tamo Bar in Boston.

Scan the menu of just about any restaurant in America, and it's clear that white-meat chicken rules the roost. Grilled chicken breasts are top sellers consistently across all food-service segments, from colleges and universities to fine dining, according to R&I's 2007 Menu Census, and chicken wings and chicken strips (the latter often touted as being "all-white-meat") are operators' most-popular appetizers.

Demand for white meat has been so much higher than for dark that every year, millions of pounds of chicken legs and thighs are exported from the United States, where dark meat has been considered something of a byproduct.

The tide seems to be turning, however, as more and more consumers are discovering how juicy and flavorful dark-meat chicken can be. Chefs, too, increasingly are showing their appreciation for the darker parts of the bird—chicken thighs in particular—and incorporating them into elegant starters and center-plate items. Besides being able to stand up to more-intense cooking techniques, such as smoking, thigh

For ease of eating and to help create a more-sophisticated-looking plate, San Francisco's Foreign Cinema bones its fried-chicken entrée (a full breast, a wing and a thigh).

meat is a significantly more economical choice than breast meat.

APPETIZING THIGHS

Chef Rachel Klein of Tamo Bar in Boston's Seaport Hotel sought to play off the popularity of chicken wings when she created Sweet-and-Spicy Chicken Lollipops, an equally menu-friendly finger food that uses chicken thighs. "People love wings," says Klein. "How can you go wrong?"

Klein special-orders the thighs frenched. In the kitchen, the thighs are deep-fried before being tossed in Asian-style sauce made with sweet-chile sauce, ketchup and *kecap manis*, a sweet variety of soy sauce. The bar bites are served over watercress and garnished with chopped cashews and sliced scallions.

Also showcasing thigh meat in small plates is Zak Pelaccio, executive chef and owner of two-unit Malaysian-

CHICKEN CASHES IN

8.8%

Share of total sales of R&I's Top 400 chains garnered by chicken concepts, second only to burgers among menu segments.

(R&I 2009 Top 400 Chain Restaurants)

inspired concept Fatty Crab in New York City. The restaurant features thigh meat in its chicken satay. "We marinate the meat for two days in a strong-flavored marinade," says Pelaccio. The chicken is then threaded onto skewers, with a piece of skin from the thigh placed between segments of meat, and cooked on a hot plancha. "As it cooks, the skin renders into the meat," he says. "You just couldn't do that with chicken breast—it couldn't take it."

KITCHEN WORKHORSE

Other operators echo Pelaccio's comments that thighs offer > 24



< 23 more-consistent performance than breast meat and, as such, are a better choice in some dishes. Jon Miller, director of research and development for Costa Mesa, Calif.-based chain El Pollo Loco, says dark meat delivers better texture and flavor for the restaurant's tacos *al carbon* and Pollo Asado burritos. "No one ever complains about dry meat if it comes from the thigh," he says. "Our tacos *al carbon* wouldn't be correct with breast meat. That's the product; that's the way you'd buy it off the street in Mexico."

Sweet-and-Spicy Chicken Lollipops

Chef Rachel Klein
Tamo Bar, Boston
Yield: 12 servings

Sweet chile sauce	2 cups
<i>Kecap manis</i> *	¼ cup
Ketchup	3 Tbsp.
Kosher salt	as needed
Black pepper	as needed
Chicken legs or thighs, frenched	5 lb.
Olive oil	¼ cup
Grapeseed oil	¼ cup
Lime juice	¼ cup
Watercress	2 cups
Toasted cashews, chopped	3 Tbsp.
Scallions, sliced	2 Tbsp.

1. For the sauce, in a stainless-steel bowl, mix together chile sauce, *kecap manis* and ketchup. Season with salt.

2. Season chicken with salt and pepper. Fry at 375F until golden brown and cooked through.

3. While chicken is frying, make the vinaigrette: Whisk together olive and grapeseed oils. Whisk in lime juice. Toss watercress with vinaigrette and place on serving plate.

4. In a bowl, toss chicken with sauce to coat. To serve, place chicken, meat-side down, on the plate. Garnish with cashews and scallions.

*A sweet Indonesian sauce similar to soy sauce

El Pollo Loco's
Taco al Carbon



At Rick Bayless' Frontera Grill in Chicago, Chef de Cuisine Richard James uses dark-meat chicken in multiple applications of the restaurant's popular enchiladas dishes. "[In the winter,] when we serve *enchiladas norteañas* covered with cheese, we tell servers not to talk [up] the dish at tables, because it sells itself," James says. "When there's 3 feet of snow on the ground, there's not enough room in the salamander to keep up with the demand."

Using dark-meat chicken can be a boon for a restaurant's bottom line, too. "Thighs offset other things that are

more expensive on the menu," notes James. Even when chefs order specialty items such as heritage chickens, there can be savings. "The profit on our chicken enchiladas is better than [it would be] if they were filled with beef or pork," he says.

ELEVATING THEIR IMAGE

Still, those who are champions for dark meat acknowledge that the protein may have a bit of an image problem. Though they don't necessarily hide the fact that a recipe contains thigh meat, many operators don't call it out,



A sophisticated presentation helps sell stuffed chicken thighs at Westbury, N.Y.'s City Cellar Wine Bar and Grill.

either. "Where we serve breast meat, the menu says so," Miller says, citing as examples El Pollo Loco's Chicken Verde Quesadilla (described as "chicken breast, green chili sauce and spicy jack cheese") and Grilled Chicken Nachos (with "flame-grilled chicken breast"). Non-breast-meat dishes get more-general language: The chain's Pollo Asado burrito features "flame-grilled chicken."

Dark meat can be a particularly challenging sell in fine dining, especially at dinner. "I had a braised-chicken dish on the lunch menu that used thighs and legs, and it did well, but when I put it on the dinner menu, no one ordered it," says Klein. "It becomes a fork-and-knife dilemma."

TWO FOR ONE

Diners do see the value, however, in dishes that include dark and white meat. At Foreign Cinema restaurant in San Francisco, chefs Gayle Pirie and John Clark have made fried chicken—and their unique presentation of it—a

house signature.

"Each diner gets half a chicken: a full breast, wing and thigh still attached but boned out," says Pirie. "It makes a more elegant and urban-looking plate that's easy to navigate with a fork and knife."

And serving both white and dark pieces gives guests more for their money. The dish sells for \$20, and "it's a huge plate of food," says Pirie. "It's really striking, and people [enjoy] that they don't have to eat around a bone. There's a 'wow' factor."

Across town at Wexler's, one of San Francisco's newest barbecue restaurants, Executive Chef Charlie Kleinman serves chicken breasts stuffed with thigh meat. He rolls the package in chicken skin, smokes it and then crisps the skin in a pan.

"The breast is most marketable," he says. "The hook is the breast because that's what people want. But then they get the thigh meat and see how wonderful and juicy it is." > 26

Enchiladas Rojas

Chef-owner Rick Bayless

Frontera Grill, Chicago

Yield: 4 servings

Ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, torn into pieces	5
Hot tap water	about 3 cups
Garlic, coarsely chopped	2 cloves
Salt	to taste
Corn tortillas	12
Vegetable oil or lard	½ cup
Romaine lettuce, sliced ¼-in. thick	4 cups
Cider vinegar	1½ Tbsp.
Chicken, cooked, shredded (optional)	2 cups
Mexican <i>queso añejo</i> (or Parmesan), grated finely	½ cup
White onion, sliced thinly	1

1. In a heavy skillet over medium heat, toast chiles, skin-side up, using a spatula to press the chile pieces flat against the surface, until

they are aromatic, about 10 seconds. Place in a bowl, cover with water, and soak 20 minutes until hydrated.

2. Transfer chiles and 1½ cups of the chile-soaking liquid to food processor. Add garlic; blend to the consistency of canned tomato sauce. Pass mixture through a mesh strainer into a pie plate. Season with ½ tsp. salt.

3. For each tortilla, in an 8-inch, nonstick skillet over medium heat, add 1 Tbsp. oil or lard. Submerge tortilla in chile sauce, and then transfer to the oil. Sear 20 seconds, then flip and sear other side. Fold tortilla in half; transfer to baking sheet. Arrange tortillas into groups of 3, overlapping slightly. Heat through in 350F oven, about 5 minutes.

4. In a small bowl, toss lettuce, vinegar and 1 pinch salt. In a small skillet over medium-low heat, warm chicken (if using) with a splash of water.

5. To serve, divide tortilla stacks among 4 plates. Sprinkle with cheese; top with onion, chicken (if using) and lettuce.

PLAYING CHICKEN

36.3%

Percent of operators who say they menu fried chicken whole or in pieces, versus 38.3% who menu roasted or baked chicken.

(R&I 2007 Menu Census)


Smoked Chicken Roulade with Bacon-and-Cornbread Stuffing

Executive Chef Charlie Kleinman

Wexler's, San Francisco

Yield: 2 servings

Roasting chicken, with livers	1
Bacon lardons	1 cup
Sage, chopped	¼ cup
Salt	as needed
Pepper	as needed
Cornbread, diced	1 cup

1. Remove half the chicken from the breast bone, keeping thigh, breast and connecting skin intact. Repeat with other side of the chicken. Remove the wing from the breast. Then carefully (making sure not to rip the skin) pull the thigh and leg away from the skin so that all of the skin stays attached to the breast.

2. Bone the thighs; pulse meat in a food processor until finely ground. Chill.

3. Render the bacon until crispy; transfer

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MAKING THE MOST OF IT

Once diners understand the way dark-meat chicken enhances the flavor of a dish, often they're won over. Servers at Wexler's are instructed to tell customers (as it's not written on the menu) that the barbecue-chicken sandwich features thigh meat. "A breast can't stand up to slow-cooking with smoke," says Kleinman. "Thighs are juicy, take on the smoke, and their chicken flavor isn't destroyed. It's a badge of honor that we use the thighs instead of breast with that sandwich."

For an entrée featuring chicken thighs this fall at City Cellar Wine Bar and Grill in Westbury, N.Y., Lisabet Summa, corporate chef for West Palm Beach, Fla.-based Big Time Restaurant Group, relies on an eye-catching presentation as well as a winning description to sell the plate. "The visual appeal of the dish is important, because people see it going through the dining room," says Summa.

That's why she chose to bone the thighs, season them with a seven-spice

bacon to a paper-towel-lined plate. In the same pan over high heat, sear livers in bacon fat until browned on one side but still rare. Chop livers; let livers and bacon cool to room temperature.

4. For the stuffing, in a medium bowl mix together thigh meat, bacon, livers, sage, salt and pepper. Fold in cornbread.

5. Lay chicken breasts skin-side down on a cutting board. Spoon 2-3 Tbsp. of stuffing onto the breast. Carefully wrap the skin around the breast and then wrap tightly in plastic wrap, twisting the ends of the plastic wrap to form a cylinder. Prick about 20 holes in the plastic wrap.

6. Leaving the plastic wrap on, smoke chicken at 200F for 20 minutes. Unwrap; transfer to a nonstick pan over medium heat. Render the skin, turning chicken slowly until all sides are crispy.

7. Transfer to a 400F oven and cook through, about 10 minutes. Let cool 5 minutes before slicing.

blend and then stuff them with Swiss chard and pine nuts. The finished chicken is served sliced, showcasing the spiral of savory ingredients inside.

Yet perhaps the most-important strategy for encouraging diners to try dark meat, Summa says, is to get servers excited about the dish. "Get them to taste it and be behind it," she says. "They'll naturally want to sell it."

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On the Menu

Juicy, flavor-rich chicken thighs are winning starring roles on menus in braised, roasted and fried preparations.

● **avec**, Chicago: Saffron-marinated chicken thigh with cabbage agrodolce, a salad of frisée and cremini mushrooms, and caraway-crème-fraîche vinaigrette

● **The Brass Cafe**, Mount Pleasant, Mich.: Organic oven-roasted chicken thigh and leg with lemon and thyme, roasted fingerling potatoes, summer ratatouille and basil pesto oil

● **Centro Latin Kitchen**, Boulder, Colo.: Grilled chicken thigh with smoked-red-pepper cream

● **Dylan's Fine Steaks & Seafood**, Westerly, R.I.: Boneless chicken wings (boneless chicken-thigh meat deep-fried and served with choice of sauce)

● **Lala Rokh**, Boston: Morgh Pollo (boned dark meat cooked with saffron and tomatoes)

● **Local Breeze Patio Café**, Phoenix: Crispy marinated chicken thigh with fresh basil and feta-yogurt sauce on a French roll

● **Perbacco**, New York City: Chicken thigh stuffed with foie gras and grilled marinated chicken breast, served with tomato salad and grilled sautéed spinach

● **Tabella Restaurant**, Amherst, Mass.: Chicken thigh and drumstick with cherrywood-smoked-serrano-pepper barbecue sauce and organic-cabbage coleslaw

● **Winston's Restaurant at Sullivan University**, Louisville, Ky.: Root-beer-marinated chicken thigh with ginger-walnut sugar snap peas and bacon