

BREADED CHICKEN FINGERS

FEW KIDS (BOTH YOUNG AND OLD) don't like the crunchy simplicity of chicken fingers—tender, boneless lengths of chicken pan-fried with a cloak of mildly flavored crumbs. They are easily served with a variety of dipping sauces or turned into sandwiches. Yet, as with most things so simple, they are best made well or not at all. Wanting to avoid rubbery chicken and a bland coating that falls off the chicken, we set out to find the best, yet simplest, way to make chicken fingers.

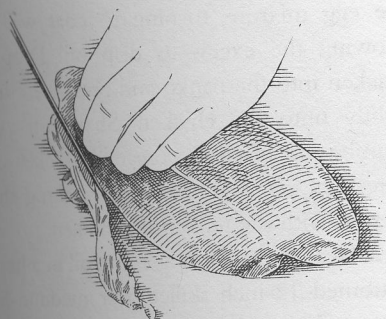
Cutting boneless, skinless chicken breasts into finger-length pieces was incredibly simple and required little skill. We did note, however, that chicken breasts can range in size drastically. We found it easiest to cut uniformly sized fingers from breasts weighing 5 to 6 ounces each. Cutting the chicken diagonally into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-wide strips, we found it unnecessary to pound them. Also, the chicken tenderloins attached to the back of each breast make perfect fingers

after the white tendon is removed.

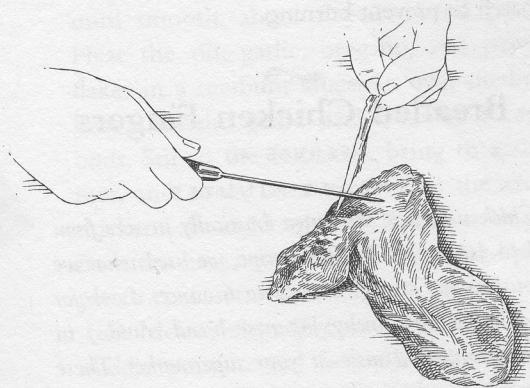
What really makes or breaks a good chicken finger is the coating. Ideally, it should taste mild and comforting and have a solid crunch. It should not be dull or greasy. To get the coating to adhere to the chicken, we found it necessary to use a bound breading, or *panade*, whereby the chicken is dipped into flour, dragged through a lightly whisked egg, and then, finally, coated with bread crumbs. We found the type of bread crumbs can make a big difference. Making our own out of sliced bread tasted great but required too much time and effort for a midweek meal. Packaged bread crumbs from the store were disappointing, offering only a stale, mass-market flavor that pleased no one. Japanese *panko* crumbs (commonly found in the ethnic aisle of the supermarket) offered a mild wheaty flavor and shatteringly crisp texture that not only won the test kitchen over but also required no work beyond the opening of a bag.

We tried to omit the flouring step noted above but found that without it, the coating

TRIMMING CHICKEN BREASTS



1. Lay each breast tenderloin-side down and smooth the top with your fingers. Any fat will slide to the periphery, where it can be trimmed with a knife.



2. To remove the tough, white tendon, turn the breasts tenderloin-side up and peel back the thick half of the tenderloin so it lies top-down on the work surface. Use the point of a paring knife to cut around the top of the tenderloin to expose the tendon, then scrape the tendon free with the knife.

merely peeled off. The flour ensured that the surface of the chicken was absolutely dry before being dipped into the egg, which guaranteed a coating with staying power. We also learned that mixing a little oil into the egg wash helped keep the breading from getting too heavy and produced a deeper, golden brown color during frying. Last, we noted the importance of pressing the crumbs into the chicken for an absolutely even distribution. As for seasoning, we found it easiest to add salt and pepper to the egg wash.

Using a heavy-bottomed 12-inch skillet, we were able to fry all the fingers in only two batches. Although this makes for a fairly crowded pan, usually a no-no when frying, we found that the small chicken fingers did not suffer a bit. Rather, they cooked through quickly and browned evenly. Pitting vegetable oil against olive oil, we preferred the light, unobtrusive flavor of the vegetable oil to the potent and slightly bitter flavor of olive oil. We found it unnecessary to use fresh oil for the second round of frying. After cooking the first batch over medium-high heat, we simply reduced the heat to medium for the second batch to prevent burning.



Breaded Chicken Fingers

SERVES 4

TIME: 30 MINUTES

Chicken breasts can range drastically in size from 4 to 10 ounces. For this recipe, we used what we consider the average size: 5 to 6 ounces. Look for panko (extra-crunchy Japanese bread crumbs) in the ethnic food aisle at your supermarket. These fingers are classically served with any number of condiments, including ketchup, barbecue sauce, honey-mustard sauce (our favorite), hot sauce, relish, mayonnaise, or a simple wedge of lemon. The fingers can be held for up to 15 minutes in a 200-degree oven before serving. Chicken fingers can

easily be turned into Chicken Parmesan Hoagies (see page 201). Serve with a basic leafy salad or green vegetable.

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
(5 to 6 ounces each), tenderloins
removed whole, breasts sliced on the
diagonal into ¾-inch-wide strips
- 1 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
- 3 cups panko (Japanese-style bread
crumbs)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 cup vegetable oil
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 1 lemon, cut into wedges, or Honey-
Mustard Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)

1. Adjust the oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 200 degrees. Thoroughly dry the breasts with paper towels. Spread the flour and panko in two separate shallow dishes. Lightly beat the eggs, 1 tablespoon oil, 1 teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon pepper in a third shallow dish. Working with several pieces of chicken at a time, drop the chicken into the flour and shake the pan to coat them. Shake the excess flour from each piece; then, using tongs, dip the chicken into the egg mixture, turning to coat well and allowing the excess to drip off. Drop the chicken into the panko and press the crumbs lightly onto the chicken. Shake off excess crumbs and place the breaded chicken on a wire rack set over a rimmed baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining chicken.

2. Heat the remaining 1 cup oil in a heavy-bottomed 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until it reaches 350 degrees—the oil will shimmer but should not smoke—3 to 4 minutes. Lay half of the chicken gently in the skillet and cook until golden brown and crisp on the first side, about 2 minutes. Using tongs, flip the chicken; continue to cook until the second

side is deep golden brown and crisp, and the chicken is no longer pink in the center, about 2 minutes longer. Transfer the chicken to a clean rimmed baking sheet lined with paper towels and place it in the warm oven. Return the skillet to medium heat and repeat with the remaining chicken. Serve immediately with the lemon wedges or honey-mustard sauce.

Honey-Mustard Dipping Sauce

MAKES A SCANT $\frac{1}{2}$ CUP, ENOUGH FOR 1 RECIPE OF CHICKEN FINGERS

TIME: 2 MINUTES

This sauce is both sweet and spicy and is a grown-up choice to go with Breaded Chicken Fingers.

- 3 tablespoons honey
- 4 tablespoons Dijon mustard

Mix the honey and mustard in a small bowl until smooth.

KEEPING SANDWICHES UPRIGHT



After slicing the rolls partially open, place them on a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Balancing the rolls slit-side up, crimp the foil around them to help them stay upright so they can be filled and finished in the oven.

Chicken Parmesan Hoagies

MAKES 4 LARGE SANDWICHES,
SERVING 6 TO 8 PEOPLE

TIME: 1 HOUR (INCLUDES MAKING THE CHICKEN FINGERS)

We found it easiest to make the tomato sauce first and then prepare and fry the chicken and, finally, assemble the sandwiches.

- 2 (14½-ounce) cans diced tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 large cloves garlic, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 4 tablespoons)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon hot red pepper flakes
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 4 (12-inch) hoagie rolls, slit partially open
- 12 ounces sliced deli mozzarella cheese (about 12 slices)
- 1 recipe Breaded Chicken Fingers (page 200), omitting lemon wedges and Honey-Mustard Dipping Sauce

1. Process the tomatoes in the workbowl of a food processor fitted with a steel blade until smooth, about five 1-second pulses. Heat the oil, garlic, oregano, and pepper flakes in a medium saucepan over medium heat until the garlic sizzles, about 40 seconds. Stir in the tomatoes, bring to a simmer, and cook, uncovered, until the sauce thickens, about 15 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and season with salt and pepper to taste; set aside.

2. Meanwhile, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees. Place the rolls side by side, cut-side up, on a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Crimp the outer edges of the foil around the rolls to prevent them from flopping on their sides (see the illustration at left). Lay 3 ounces sliced mozzarella (about 3 slices) inside each roll. Lay

4 or 5 chicken fingers on the mozzarella and top with ½ cup tomato sauce. Bake until the cheese is melted and the rolls are lightly toasted, about 10 minutes. Serve immediately.

NUT-CRUSTED CHICKEN BREASTS

BY REPLACING BREAD CRUMBS WITH nuts, a simple breaded chicken breast can be quickly transformed. Yet, for the transformation to be a success, we had to uncover a few key tricks.

Using boneless, skinless chicken breasts, we began by adapting our standard breading technique: dredging the chicken in flour and then an egg wash, and, finally, bread crumbs. We first tried replacing the bread crumbs with sliced almonds, but the thin almond slices refused to stick to the chicken. We had more success when the almonds were processed into fine crumbs in the food processor, but even then the crust tasted dense, oily, and sodden after it was cooked. In an effort to lighten the crust, we mixed the nuts with bread crumbs. Testing various ratios of nuts to bread crumbs, we landed on a ratio of 2 parts freshly ground nuts to 1 part crumbs. We found that light Japanese-style bread crumbs, called panko, worked especially well.

Given the density of the nut-bread crumb mixture, we wondered if the initial step of flouring the chicken was necessary. Cooking two nut-crusted pieces of chicken, one floured and one not, side by side, we found the differences minor; in the spirit of streamlining, we decided to omit the flouring step.

Cooking the chicken turned out to be fairly straightforward. The important factors were to use a skillet large enough to comfortably cook four pieces of chicken and to use plenty of oil. Much like regular breaded

chicken, the breasts have to be pan-fried rather than sautéed. As for flavor, we were surprised to find the nut crust tasted relatively mild. To spruce it up, flavoring the egg wash with ingredients such as Dijon mustard, citrus zest, or both was easy and effective.

Noticing how well the nut-crusted chicken tasted with fruit, we made the short jump to pairing it with a wilted spinach salad and a fruit-based dressing. Holding the chicken warm in a 200-degree oven, we simply wiped the oil out of the pan and returned it to the stove to make a warm dressing. This method lightly wilted baby spinach without turning it wet or slimy. Cooked from start to finish in 45 minutes, this exotic-tasting meal is far from your average chicken and salad supper.

Almond-Crusted Chicken Breasts with Wilted Spinach-Orange Salad

SERVES 4

TIME: 45 MINUTES

It should take about 10 seconds to process the almonds into fine crumbs; don't overprocess them or the nuts will become oily. If you want to add a starch, try a couscous or quinoa pilaf (see Chapter 4) made without nuts.

- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 ¼ teaspoons grated zest and 4 wedges from 1 orange
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 1 cup sliced almonds, processed into fine crumbs in the food processor
- ½ cup panko (Japanese-style bread crumbs)
- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (5 to 6 ounces each), trimmed (see the illustrations on page 199) and dried thoroughly with paper towels
- 8 tablespoons vegetable oil