
'Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives' finds authenticity soaked to the bone at Uncle Lou's Fried Chicken and Stuff

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Special to The Commercial Appeal

Wednesday, February 6, 2008

Guy Fieri breezed into town last week and got splattered.

And he declared it delicious.

The Food Network luminary and manic host of "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives" was visiting local establishments, part of a tour that takes him around the country's DDDs to find out what elevates a greasy spoon to a guilty pleasure.

His whirlwind took him to Cozy Corner, Marlowe's, Leonard's and the Little Tea Shop along with some deep-fried fun at Uncle Lou's Fried Chicken and Stuff and family soul at Alcenia's.

At Uncle Lou's, gravel-voiced charmer and owner-chef Louis Martin found he and Fieri were on the same wavelength. "I'm lovin' it! We're verbose, the two of us," the chicken man said as the media star's eyes got wide after taking a vinegar hit: "That's spicy -- I'm gonna twitch."

It was like that all morning and into the afternoon on Thursday, first in the cramped kitchen of Uncle Lou's as crew with cameras, boom mikes, audio gear, a crisply efficient producer with clipboard and Fieri crowded around Martin, who showed how a wing comes to glory. Even with all the hubbub, things seemed fairly normal in the diner where not much is subdued anyway. "ONE FORTY TWO! NUMBER ONE FORTY TWO!" is hollered out and a customer waves and the meal is delivered just as always although, as cashier Michelle Peterson says, it got hotter than usual in the kitchen with all the lights.

But nothing stops the production of chicken, home style and honeyed, even the presence of Fieri, the California fireball who won "The Next Food Network Star" competition in 2006, and still sports his trademark earrings, tattoos, goatee, Dickie's skateboard shorts and fashionable shades carefully displayed at the back of the neck.

Andre Bardwell was minding his own business inhaling some wings when Guy spotted him. "Do you always wear a white shirt?" the celeb chef asked. Bardwell, a regular for years, said his wings were the honey dipped variety and thus not so messy. He proceeded to tell Fieri that "it's not just the food, it's the service and people," that he likes about Uncle Lou's. It's also due to encouragement from his family -- his mother was craving some wings and his brothers are avid consumers as well. "Believe it or not," said the imposing Bardwell, "I'm the smallest one in the family."

Fieri did not argue, instead saying, "Show me the bones -- there," he pointed, and then looked at the camera, "That is how is you eat a wing, that's the only way."

Martin said when he first got the call that Fieri would be coming, he responded: "Yeah, right." Asking how they found out about him, he said they had scoured the Internet and Uncle Lou's kept coming up so they decided to give it a try. Not that Lou was anxious, but he did say, "They told me they'd be back in two weeks -- it seemed like two years."

Memphis is a barbecue town, as every food show in creation will tell you, but Fieri's current DDD tour is not just about 'cue. This is collecting food gems in other categories in locations that also include Atlanta, Florida and Alabama. The show will air in May.

What is it about the Bluff City that is such a culinary magnet? Just Saturday the new Food Network series "Down Home with the Neelys" with Patrick and Gina Neely debuted.

"Memphis is one of the cultural foundations of our country," Fieri says simply and expansively. "So much goes on and we want to recognize influences like Memphis."

Don't stop, Guy. Keep slathering that affirmation sauce: "We want to get a good idea of where you're going and why."

That's as satisfying as the Corruption in a Bottle on sale at Uncle Lou's, where Fieri hollers into the dining room, "We're all out of chicken! The fat guy from Food Network ate it all!"

Later, the visiting chef confides about Martin: "He doesn't understand, after this, things are gonna blow up. He's gonna do really good."

Well, maybe Uncle Lou actually does get it, revealing: "Guy said this is gonna be 'money.'" Martin grinned, knowing that the Guyism "money" means it's the real deal.

Off to the side, Frederick Plummer of Mr. P's Buffalo Wings is observing the silliness with amusement. "Lou's father and I go way back, so I am trying to support whatever he does," said Plummer, an elegant and thoughtful gentleman with six restaurants.

Fieri, who owns several restaurants himself, says he does his TV gig because it's fun and because he can give a boost to worthy restaurateurs.

"To me, it's a great fit to give people recognition," he said on Friday after spending some time at Alcenia's on North Main. There, the restaurant's owner B. J. Chester-Tamayo and Fieri huddled in the kitchen going over the finer points of soul food.

"He's sweet, giving me nice tips," says Chester-Tamayo. And with nice understatement: "He's got lots of energy." The culinary lesson du jour involves hot water cornbread, pork chops and "cha cha" -- a cabbage condiment that is one of the restaurant's signature items and more commonly known as chow chow.

Dan and Carla Houser from Lake Mary, Fla., were in town for the International Blues Challenge supporting their favorite group, the Smokin' Torpedoes, but had no idea they'd land in the middle of a Food Network taping. Lured by a recommendation in Frommers, they'd come in before the restaurant was officially open, but they were welcomed anyway and fussed over by restaurant staff and production crew. A taste of cornbread kept them intrigued in the middle of the diner that is a riot of color and folk art.

In the center of it all was Alcenia Chester, B.J.'s 87-year-old mother whose recipes inspired the enterprise. She observed the proceedings sternly, a woman who likes what she likes and what she doesn't, well -- for one thing, there's a portrait of her on the wall. "I don't like it. I told her not to put it up there." The matriarch gets no support there -- the image not only dominates the dining room but is on the menus as well. Guy even pitches in saying he likes it. The great-grandmother stoically accepts his compliment, and the two make quite a pair: the little old lady with gray hair and a foot shorter than the California upstart with the bleached, spiky mane.

But later she finds herself unable to just sit at a table while there are cameras and chefs in the kitchen. "I'm going to go straighten them out."

Later on, the talk is of cabbage and such when Fieri fires off some of his patented Yankee patter that flies over everyone's head. Chester-Tamayo just gives him an exasperated look: "There you go again talking Greek."

The host grins back at her. "It's Guyology."

Yes, he leaves an indelible mark wherever he goes, presented with a certain bad boy charm and certified by his undiluted love of food. But Fieri also takes back with him a deeper appreciation of the kinds of magic stirred up in local kitchens.

As he said after learning that there was such a thing as sweet potato bread: "I'm gonna remember that one."

