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# Korean-style fried chicken is crackling in Hampton Roads. Here's the best — and the rest

By MATTHEW KORFHAGE  
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | AUG 07, 2020



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CM Chicken / Choong Man Chicken, order of garlic soy tikkudak chicken wings. Aug. 5, 2020 (L. Todd Spencer/The Virginian-Pilot)

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South Korea is the world's most dedicated and miraculous laboratory for fried chicken, perhaps the only place in the world as obsessed with breaded poultry as the American South.

South Korea now boasts more than 80,000 restaurants, and at least one soap opera, devoted to *chimaek*: the sacred, double-fisted combo of fried chicken and beer made popular in 2002 during the Korea–Japan World Cup. As of the beginning of 2020, nearly one in four franchises in South Korea was a fried chicken stop.

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Over the past decade or so, the crispy, crackly, double-dipped Korean fried chicken has also been slowly taking over America. And locally, the pace has accelerated this year. Early in 2019, Hampton Roads sported only a couple dedicated Korean fried chicken spots. Now there are two dueling Seoul food chains and at least three homegrown

spots dedicated to Korean fried chicken

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What differentiates Korean fried chicken is simple: the flavors, and the double dip in the fryer that leads to both less grease and more crispness. When corn or potato starch is used in the breader, the result can be a paper-thin skin that crackles like the top of a creme brulee, fuming with garlic and fried onion and chili and the deep ferment of soy.

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Pickled daikon radish comes on the side, to cut the heat and fat — much like a celery stick with your Buffalo wings.

The plate is a delicious but relatively recent creation. Fried chicken was first brought to Korea by homesick American GIs in the '60s. But for most Koreans chicken remained a relatively rare luxury, usually made into stews or bought off a rotisserie spit.

After both chicken and oil became cheap and accessible in the 1970s, Lim's Chicken chain in Seoul kicked off a nationwide fried-chicken boom that has snowballed into an enduring obsession. To be heard above the oil-

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The Korean chains are also expanding into new markets — most notably to China and the United States. And so here we are, eating a delicious glut of crispy, spicy, garlic-spiked Korean fried chicken.

We've spent the past month or two touring the local spots that have made Korean fried chicken their specialty, and ranked them in order of preference. For apples-to-apples comparison, we decided to leave out the Korean-inspired fusion versions made at spots like Alkaline Ramen in Norfolk or Hot Pho in Virginia Beach, and the sauce-slathered Korean fried chicken sandwiches you sometimes find at local bars.

Here's your guide to the other KFC in Hampton Roads.

## Winner: Choong Man Chicken

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CM Chicken / Choong Man Chicken, order of snow chicken tenders with onions on top. Aug. 5, 2020. (L. Todd Spencer/The Virginian-Pilot)

*2040 Coliseum Drive, [Hampton](#), 757-800-9893; 908 S. Lynnhaven Road, Virginia Beach, 757-800-7706; 200 Monticello Ave., [Williamsburg](#) (inside Bonanza Social Kitchen), 757-808-6032. \$11-\$15 for a box of about a dozen tenders or wings. Takeout or delivery apps only*

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blast across the American map — in Texas, Georgia, Kansas, and especially in Virginia.

Choong Man (which pops up on delivery apps as CM Chicken), has opened three locations in Hampton Roads in the past six months. And local Realtor Soo Choi, who teamed with the owners of Choong Man franchises in Northern Virginia, isn't stopping there. She's opening two more in Richmond, and scouting spots in Norfolk and Chesapeake.

Their fried chicken, whether delivered as wings or tenders or an indiscriminately chopped whole bird, has already become something of a personal obsession: I've eaten it more times than I care to disclose. On multiple visits to Hampton and Virginia Beach, I've found their chicken to be thickly crisp-breaded, juicy, meaty, smoke-charred and impossibly dense with flavor.

This goes for an earthy soy garlic brightened with a light bite of chili pepper, and a flavorful red hot pepper chicken so Vesuvian it's nearly psychotropic — it shares with Nashville's hot chicken the ability to slip your tongue into a mind-altering and de Sadean realm of heat, where pain and pleasure have lost all distinction.

Their signature snow onion, meanwhile, comes slathered in a sweet, mayo-based sauce that seems custom-made for a Southern palate. And the curry is a masterwork of lightly sweet, earthy depth. Even better, the chain offers an option to make your chicken "tikkudak," crisping and smoking it in a proprietary charcoal oven.

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CM Chicken / Choong Man Chicken, order of garlic soy tikkudak chicken wings. Aug. 5, 2020 (L. Todd Spencer/The Virginian-Pilot)

But there's a catch. Much like a river in ancient Greece, you seemingly can't step into the same Choong Man twice.

The tikkudak chicken on one trip to Virginia Beach arrived so blessedly smoked it would make a pitmaster blush, fuming with more charcoal than a forest fire. But on most visits to Hampton, the charcoal tikkudak imparts just a rumor of char; our cashier seemed confused when we mentioned that the tikkudak might be smoky elsewhere.

This has apparently been true in Northern Virginia as well. Last year, Washington Post food writer Tim Carman embarked on [\*\*a charcoal-smudged vision quest\*\*](#) to find out why the tikkudak didn't arrive uniformly smoky, and discovered that some locations used liquid smoke, or didn't use charcoal at all.

Choi says that's not true in Hampton Roads, and that they use only Royal Oak charcoal. However, she says they are still calibrating temperatures and times in the charcoal oven.

But it's not only the smoke at Choong Man that's inconsistent. From visit to visit, even at the same location, crispness can also vary mightily, ranging from a satisfying crunch to light rubberiness. The whole experience is a bit like being with someone you love very much, who nonetheless gets a little too drunk sometimes.

Still, the variety and intensity of the flavors at Choong Man keep them atop this list. Their chicken is almost troublingly habit forming — some of the best junk food in the region on a good day. Even their bad days, which do come, are still pretty good.

**Runner-up: Chick N Roll**

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The combo platter at Chick N Roll includes three fried chicken wings, a roll and choice of french fries or coleslaw. This version features wings brushed with a sweet and savory sauce, french fries and a vegetable roll. (Sonja Barisic / The Virginian-Pilot)

*5660 Portsmouth Blvd., Portsmouth, 757-956-5536, [toasttab.com/chicknroll/v3](http://toasttab.com/chicknroll/v3). Five wings for \$7, 20 wings for \$24. Online ordering, takeout only.*

For sterling execution and consistency, you can come instead to Chick N Roll, a Portsmouth sushi-and-fried-chicken spot opened in July of last year by Korean-born Hyon “Kim” LeRoy.

LeRoy hails from the Southern city of Daegu. But before opening Chick N Roll here, she traveled to Seoul to take classes at a school devoted to fried chicken — yes, Korea is just that serious about its birds — mostly, she says, to figure out what the competition was doing.

For her own chicken, she spent months figuring out the mix of more than 20 flavors she uses in her powdered spice mix and brine — including apple and pineapple — and the precise mixture of cornstarch and wheat flour for her breader.

The attention to detail has mattered. The skin on Chick N Roll’s garlic soy or sweet and spicy wings is the most consistently on point of any of the spots we tried: thin-breaded and devoid of grease, with a textbook, paper-crackly crunch over chicken that remains moist within. (The “original crispy” reads closer to an American Southern style.)

And if the flavors are not as intense as at Choong Man, they remain well balanced and satisfying with the garlic

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of your chicken by ordering it as part of a sushi lunch combo. For \$9 to \$12, you get three wings and your choice of low-cost, fresh sushi roll made mostly with variations on veggies and crab.

The combo makes for a meal of surprising lightness, with wings that are themselves characterized best by their delicacy: They are the lightest, and deftest, of the Korean fried wings in the area.

### 3. Chick N Fish

*954 J. Clyde Morris Blvd., Newport News, 757-223-6517, [chicknfishva.com](http://chicknfishva.com). Eight wings for \$8.95, four drums for \$7.95, many combos available. Takeout/dine-in.*

At 9 years old, Newport News' Chick N Fish was perhaps the first to offer Korean fried chicken in these parts, before most here had encountered the form. And so much of Moo and Insoon Hwang's menu is also devoted to comforts more familiar to the Chesapeake Bay: fried shrimp and whiting and catfish.

But the Hwangs' take on Korean fried chicken is what makes the restaurant distinctive. Their take is admirably meaty, with both drumsticks and wings thick in their heft. The breading is likewise generous and crisp, if also a bit unevenly so. Chick's hot and spicy flavor tends toward sweet and gloopy, but the garlic soy is a bit more restrained, and also a bit more successful.

And while Chick N Fish offers the same pickled-radish side as every other Korean fried chicken spot in town, do yourself a favor: Order the kimchi. The Hwangs' house-made, chili-drenched and fermented cabbage is one of the finest renditions in the region. It is fiery, crisp, and rich with funk.

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### 4. Bonchon

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Half-and-half soy garlic and spicy wings at Bonchon in Norfolk. (Matthew Korfage)

*273 Granby St., Norfolk, 757-383-6915, [bonchon.com](http://bonchon.com). Hilltop location coming soon. \$10.95 for 10 wings. Online ordering, takeout, curbside and delivery apps.*

Bonchon is the earliest and most famous Korean fried chicken franchise in America, with more than a hundred locations — though it remains interestingly obscure in Korea itself, with an outlet in Seoul pushing all the sauces to the United States and the rest of the world.

The chain has become most of this country's starter kit for the crisp crackle of Korean fried chicken, on a menu that also includes Korean-menu staples such as tteokbokki rice cakes and bibimbap.

Bonchon moved into Norfolk in late 2016, and plans a Hilltop location in Virginia Beach shortly. But it might find stiff competition with Choong Man in Virginia Beach. The options at Bonchon are minimal compared to Choong Man's rainbow of flavors: just soy garlic, spicy, or plain.

And compared to the spots that top this list, the flavors are much more muted: a sweet and somewhat flat garlic soy, and a spicy flavor that smacked mostly of straightforward chili pepper.

The execution in Norfolk has also been a bit spotty. Satisfying texture is Bonchon's mainstay in most locations around the country — that rewarding punch through paper-thin skin, and into the tender meat beneath.

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But one recent visit to Bonchon found the chicken so over-fried that its breading separated from the meat and flaked into dust, leaving wet and oddly gristly meat behind. A second attempt, a month later, was more successful but still found the chicken unevenly cooked and tough against the bone. And without that perfect texture, Bonchon's sauces just don't have the amplitude to matter.

## 5. Domoishi

*Eight Hampton Roads locations, with three more planned. See [domoishi.com/locations](http://domoishi.com/locations). Six wings for \$6.95. Online ordering, takeout, and delivery apps.*

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Domoishi, though just a couple years old, already sprawls across Virginia, with eight Hampton Roads locations. The local chain is the new venture of Sushi King and Peter Chang restaurant impresario Sam Huang — a pan-Pacific paean to Japanese ramen, Taiwanese bubble tea, Hawaiian-Californian poke and Korean fried chicken.

With locations in five Hampton Roads cities, Domoishi is likely the most accessible Korean fried chicken spot for much of Hampton Roads. But the wings at the Norfolk location were unevenly cooked and breaded; the meat was a bit tough; and the soy garlic flavor was possessed by an untraceable funk

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Two Up Two Down's menu concise but varied in  
Portsmouth  
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fared better, though its main tasting notes were heat and a little sweetness.

Still, the skin is crisp, and the price is right if you're in a time of sudden need — you never know where you'll be when the urge for Korean fried chicken strikes.

*Matthew Korfhage, 757-446-2318, matthew.korfhage@pilotonline.com*

Topics: Hampton Roads restaurants, Korean food, fried chicken, Korean fried chicken, places to go, interesting

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Matthew Korfhage



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Matthew Korfhage is food writer for The Virginian-Pilot. For a decade, he wrote about restaurants, bars and beer in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. He accepts Dungeness crab and Upright Brewing beer by mail.

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