

It's a Buffalo sauce stampede

The hot concoction coats much more than your Super Bowl wings

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My, how far Buffalo has roamed.

Not the city. It's right where it always was, frozen in place on the shore of Lake Erie in upstate New York.

It's the sauce that's spreading.

Sure, Buffalo wings are hot. But here on the verge of Sunday's Super Bowl, what we really noticed are the Buffalo variations. These days, you can't shake a wing without hitting a Buffalo pizza, Buffalo-flavored snack or a new Buffalo recipe. Don't believe us? Check the café at the Whole Foods in Raleigh: Buffalo tofu. Vegan Buffalo tofu.

Who could have guessed that Buffalo sauce, that molten red mix of heat, vinegar and butter, would go so far? It started one fateful night in 1964 when Teresa Bellissimo tossed the sauce and wings together for late-night customers at Buffalo's Anchor Bar.

Once the rest of the nation figured out the formula — 1/4 cup butter and 1/2 cup pepper sauce, usually Frank's Original RedHot, which used to be called Louisiana Hot Sauce — Buffalo wings caught on and have been challenging guacamole for Super Bowl snacking supremacy since the 1980s.

The latest numbers show that 23 percent of viewers eat an estimated 1.25 billion wings during the game.

But lately, Buffalo has increased its range. Page through the food magazines: Buffalo chicken casserole in Eating Well, Buffalo chicken thighs in Cooking Light, slow-cooker Buffalo sandwiches in Martha Stewart's Everyday Food.

When "The Meatball Shop Cookbook" was released by a New York restaurant last fall, it included a recipe for one of its best-sellers, Mini Buffalo Chicken Balls.

The research company Datamonitor recorded 75 new products with "Buffalo" in the name in 2008 and '09. And they're still coming. New this year: Buffalo Chicken Rice Sides from Knorr and Blazin' Buffalo Blue Diamond Almonds.

On the snacks aisle, it's practically a herd, from Doritos Blazin' Buffalo & Ranch to Ruffles' Molten Hot Wings flavor.

The battle is really gearing up on the sauce aisle, where several feet of shelf space is now devoted to both wing sauces and hot sauces designed for making wing sauces. The newest entry is from Tabasco. The McIlhenny Co. released Buffalo-Style Hot Sauce nationwide in January after three years of development. It's a hot sauce, not a prepared wing sauce, which puts it in the same category with Frank's Original RedHot and Texas Pete.

"Buffalo has been a flavor trend, not just a wing thing," says McIlhenny vice president Tony Simmons. "It's way, way beyond wings."

"It does seem to hit a very important balance between flavor and heat for an enormous number of people."

If there is a Buffalo season, this would be it, he says.

The weird and the purist

How weird can the Buffalo fever get? Last year, the NBC show "30 Rock" made a joke about a mythological Buffalo Chicken Shake.

A video quickly popped up on YouTube, from a blogger demonstrating how to make one.

All of this makes us wonder how actual Buffalo natives feel about it. Frank Pullano, an associate math professor at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, is a wing purist. He grew up in Fredonia, a small university town about 40 miles from Buffalo. "Ten-cent chicken wing night was a big night in Fredonia," he says.

For his yearly Super Bowl party, he's emphatic on the invitation: He makes the wings.

"I do not eat chicken wings down here. Because they're never as good. It's like Mom's meat loaf. I grew up with certain chicken wings."

Still, he's happy to see something so beloved emerge from Buffalo.

"Buffalo gets a bad rap. The rest of the country only sees clips of Buffalo when it snows. So this culinary delight known as Buffalo wings is a good thing.

"Except the milkshake. I can't get my mind around that."

Mini Buffalo Chicken Balls

From "The Meatball Shop Cookbook," by Daniel Holzman and Michael Chernow (Ballantine Books, 2011).

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter

1/3 cup pepper sauce, such as Frank's RedHot or Texas Pete

1 pound ground chicken, preferably thigh meat

1 large egg

1/2 celery stalk, minced (about 1/2 cup)

3/4 cup bread crumbs (see note)



My, how the Buffalo wing has roamed. The buffalo seasoning profile — hot sauce, vinegar and creamy blue cheese — is showing up everywhere from soups to meatballs. We'll talk to Buffalo, N.Y., transplants about whether that's a travesty, try to find some industry chefs and experts on why that flavor is so darned appealing, and do a tasting of some of the products out there. Recipes will be some of the above. Chicken Buffalo meatballs, T. Ortega Gaines - ogaines@charlotteobserver.com

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Blue Cheese Dressing (see recipe)

PREHEAT the oven to 450 degrees. Drizzle the oil into a 13-by-9-inch baking dish and use your hand (or a brush) to evenly coat the entire surface.

COMBINE the butter and hot sauce in a small saucepan and cook over low heat, whisking until the butter is melted and fully mixed. Remove from heat and cool for 10 minutes.

COMBINE the hot sauce mixture, ground chicken, egg, celery, bread crumbs and salt in a large mixing bowl and mix by hand until thoroughly incorporated. (If the mixture is too soft to roll, refrigerate it for about 30 minutes.)

ROLL the mixture into small, round balls, each about 1-inch in diameter, making sure to pack each one firmly. Place the balls in the baking dish, lining them up snugly so that each is touching.

ROAST 15 to 20 minutes or until firm and cooked through. A meat thermometer inserted in the center should read 165 degrees. Cool 5 minutes before serving. (If you make them in advance and you want to heat them again before serving, place them under a broiler for a few minutes, just until starting to brown.)

NOTE: The book calls for dry bread crumbs but suggests avoiding panko, which are crunchier. We used panko in testing, however, and found it worked fine, especially if you chill the mixture for about 30 minutes.

Yield: 40 meatballs.

Blue Cheese Dressing

From "The Meatball Shop Cookbook." You can use a prepared blue cheese dressing, but this version makes a tart, flavorful dip.

3/4 cup sour cream

1/3 cup crumbled blue cheese

1/3 cup whole milk

1/3 cup mayonnaise

1 teaspoon salt, or to taste

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

PLACE the sour cream, blue cheese, milk, mayonnaise, salt and vinegar in a medium bowl. Whisk thoroughly until completely combined.

TASTE and adjust the seasoning if needed.

Yield: 2 cups.

Buffalo Chicken Soup

Although some buffalo soups are made in the slow cooker, I developed this version to come together quickly and easy on the stove. It's perfect for a Super Bowl party.

1 to 2 skinless, boneless chicken breasts and 2 to 3 boneless chicken thighs (see note)

3 to 4 cups chicken stock

1/4 cup butter

3 stalks celery, minced (about 1 cup)

1 small onion, peeled and minced

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup half-and-half

1/4 cup to 1/2 cup Buffalo wing sauce, or to taste

Salt and pepper to taste

1 1/2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese

1/2 cup crumbled blue cheese, divided

PLACE the chicken and stock in a large pot and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Cover and simmer about 15 minutes. Turn off heat and let the chicken sit for about 10 minutes, until cooked through. Dice the chicken, discarding any fat or cartilage. Drain the broth. Set both aside.

RETURN the pot to the stove. Melt the butter over medium-high heat. Add the celery and onion and cook, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes. Add the flour, stir well and cook about 2 minutes, until just beginning to brown a little. Stir in the half-and-half and 3 cups chicken stock.

STIR in the chicken, wing sauce, mozzarella and 1/4 cup blue cheese. Reduce heat to low and cook about 10 minutes, stirring often to keep the cheese from sticking. Taste and adjust seasoning, adding more wing sauce if needed.

SERVE hot, with a little blue cheese sprinkled on each serving.

NOTE: Instead of cooking the chicken, you can use 3 to 4 cups chopped, cooked chicken and just use prepared chicken stock in the soup.

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

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