

For the past several weeks, I've been wondering about chicken-fried steak. This wholly American dish intrigues me. It's foreign to me. While growing up, we ate breaded cutlets from pork or veal but never round steak and that white gravy was a complete mystery to me until I moved to California! I was curious as to what made chicken-fried steak an American classic. Why would the hamburger become an international food export but not the chicken-fried steak?

On a recent weekend trip to Nevada, I had the opportunity to taste some chicken-fried steak for the first time. The cook hand-pounded the steak, seasoned and floured it, and then fried it carefully. It was almost as tender as the Wiener schnitzel I'd tasted at the Hof Brau in Regensburg and something I thought I'd like to try again. Last week, when Lynne and I left for racing in British Columbia, I decided that the chance to do so had arrived and resolved to try it at least twice on the road.

My first opportunity came when we stopped at the Black Bear Diner in Mt. Shasta City for lunch. Since they serve breakfast all day, I decided to have chicken-fried steak and eggs for lunch. I was not disappointed! The steak was not mechanically tenderised but it was still tender. The seasoning and coating was perfect and the gravy was tasty.

As has become our habit, we grabbed one of the restaurant comment cards to send off to a friend as a postcard. (Let me put in a plug here for postcards ... in these times of email and instant communication, there is something truly wonderful about friends exchanging cards and postcards. Try it!)

As Lynne and I continued north and into Oregon, we were overwhelmed by the ongoing heat. California's Central Valley was going through a heat wave and we'd hoped we'd be escaping it somewhat by heading north. If the temperatures in Oregon were indicative of anything, we were out of luck!

When we stopped at the Rogue River rest area just over the Oregon border, the heat bowled us over. But hey, look! the sprinklers were on! With the dogs none the wiser, we each wandered over to where the sprinklers were busy watering the rest area lawn and loitered until the spray hit us. The dogs were not amused, immediately shaking themselves. Lynne and I thought it was a rather wonderful experience so we put the dogs up and went back for more...

We decided to end our day of travel at Eugene, Oregon. In the past, we've travelled as far as Tigard, another couple of hours down the road, before stopping but, since our destination wasn't as far as usual, we realised we could try something new. We stayed at the Motel 6 just south of Eugene (note to travellers: it's very noisy and there's nowhere to walk the dogs) and went on a quest for Mexican food.

Before heading out, I'd done a little bit of food research and found a review of a restaurant called Chapala's. They supposedly had the best Mexican food in Eugene and, when I found their menu online, I discovered that they offered our favourite--green enchiladas! How could we not try it out?

We were not disappointed. The chicken filling was plentiful and very tasty and the sauce, oh the sauce! It had just the right balance between the tomatillos' tartness and the heat from the chiles.

If the day's food was any indication, we were going to be in for a wonderful trip!

[...]

The next morning, Lynne and I were more than eager to get underway. Today we'd be stopping at House of Hong in Seattle for dim sum!

We were so focused on the prospect of dim sum and silver noodles, the journey between Eugene and Seattle was a blur. Finally, we reached Exit 164A and, for once, we didn't take the wrong turn after the exit! Within minutes, we were in the parking lot near House of Hong!

It was here that the first glitch in our well-laid plans appeared. The parking lot attendant wouldn't park the van because we insisted that it be parked somewhere shady. The House of Hong parking lot was full. We started to grow desperate...how could we have our dim sum, if we couldn't park the van somewhere?

Just as we were about to leave the parking lot in search of somewhere (anywhere!) to leave the van, a car vacated a prime spot on the road. It was in the shade, it was near House of Hong, and (best of all) it was free!

I immediately jumped out of the van and ran to the spot, ready to throw myself under the tires of any vehicle attempting to steal the spot out from under us. What's this? another car leaving? excellent! I moved slightly to let that driver out and then turned to yell directions to Lynne.

Within a moment or two, there was quite a queue of cars, waiting for that second parking spot. Horns were honking and people were cursing at me in Cantonese. I just turned and waved at the drivers. We were unflappable. Nothing was going to sway us from our course...silver noodles were at stake!

Finally, we were parked and, after locking up the van, we started down the street. I resisted the temptation to stick my tongue out at the parking lot attendant, who had watched the entire parking event.

Dim sum was superb; we had silver noodles, har gow (shrimp dumplings), sui mai (pork dumplings), and nor my gai (sticky rice with sausage steamed in a lotus leaf). Lynne decided that she preferred House of Hong's bowl of sticky rice over nor my gai but I still like the more traditional dish better.

With happy tummies, we left Seattle and headed north again. At Bellingham, we turned off the freeway and drove the back roads to Sumas, where we would cross the border into Abbotsford. We might have to travel a little slower on the state road but we were more than happy to avoid the Friday-afternoon-on-a-long-weekend traffic that would be on the Trans-Canada!

After getting checked in to our motel, we headed out to run some shopping errands and to grab some dinner. After the thrill of risking my life for a parking spot in Seattle's Chinatown, everyday life seemed so banal. Would my new-found thirst for danger ever be quenched? At dinner, I noticed the restaurant menu proudly announced their support for the beleaguered Canadian beef industry and so, eager to live life on the edge again, I ordered the prime rib.

[...]

Racing started at 10:00 the next morning and I was looking forward to it! I'm Parker and Makena's designated catcher and, before leaving for BC, I'd asked Lorna if I could help handle Derby, the Whippet Princess.

As a rookie, Derbs was up first so off we went to the boxes. I was hoping that Lorna was right, that she was a dream to box. I didn't think I could bear handling a Tighe-clone! Lorna didn't steer me wrong though and Derby zoomed right into her box. I wondered if she might be able to teach her dad how to do that...

Between races, I flitted about, visiting and chatting with friends. It's always wonderful to go home and see everyone. Combine that with the fun and excitement of racing and I'm a happy girl! So, happy in fact, that I didn't even notice my skin steadily getting pinker and pinker. At one point during the day, Lorna asked me if I had any sunscreen and, although it crossed my mind briefly that perhaps I should find some to "borrow", the thought just as quickly left my head. I had better things to think about--like beer!

On Wednesday before heading out, I'd received an email from Tracy, asking if I was going to the races in Abbotsford and saying that, if so, she had a new beer for me to try. This inspired not a little anticipation in me and I was quite looking forward to trying it out. I'd told Tracy about Fred's homemade beer and, in my mind, had elaborated on the entire beer situation until it became a veritable fete of beer drinking!

While at the meet, Fred brought me over a bottle of his red wine, along with his apologies that he and Jean would be unable to attend the after-party. Along with missing their company, I told him about Tracy and my plans for beer- drinking. Well, Fred immediately offered up two bottles of his homemade beer. In exchange, Tracy gave him a bottle of her Red Seal and I handed over a bottle of Sleeman's. If Fred and Jean couldn't be at the party, at least we could toast him with his beer!

By the time the races were over, my skin was feeling pretty toasty and looking rather, well, lobsterish. Talk about chicken-fried! I had chicken-fried legs and chicken-fried arms and a chicken-fried neck and a chicken-fried face.

At the after party at Jim and Yvonne's house, I pretty much just hung out in the shade, avoiding the sunshine like a vampire. Tracy and I opened our Fred beers, clinked bottles in a toast to the brewer, and enjoyed his wonderful beverage. Little did we know that Fred's beer is legendary as a high-octane brew. As the evening progressed, both Tracy and I sipped on a Red Seal but neither of us were able to finish a second beer.

The potluck dinner was a feast with salads and meatballs and chicken and more salads. I'd stupidly gone to walk the dogs when dinner was first ready so missed out on some of the food but managed to tuck in to a good-sized meal nonetheless. Before leaving home, I'd made a trip to the Mexican market to buy some dulce de leche and had also gone to the grocery store to buy a selection of sundae toppings. This would be my contribution to the potluck and Bill stepped up to the plate by bringing the ice cream. That all paled in comparison to Val's chocolate mousse pie. Now, if I'd made that pie, I'd include the recipe right here but, as I didn't, I'll have to settle for inserting a piteous plea to Val to share it. (Pretty please, Val, with sugar on top?)

After the potluck, it was back to the motel in Abbotsford. It was still fairly early so Lynne and I decided to bushwhack our way down the bank behind the motel to the Walmart. She had given herself a nasty blister on her foot and was looking for a comfortable pair of shoes to wear. As for me, I wanted a straw hat and some sunscreen. Yeah, it was a bit of closing the barn door after the cows got out but it could be worse—I wasn't blistering yet. Although I managed to find my hat, Lynne was not as successful in her quest for comfy shoes. So, we returned to the motel and decided to treat her foot as we would treat one of the dogs with a burned pad--in the morning, she'd dress it just like she taped her dogs!

[...]

[Warning: there is excessive shameless bragging in this nest bit. Big time.]

The next morning, I was disappointed to discover that my sunburn still hurt. Sometimes, a slight burn will dissipate overnight but this definitely wasn't one of those times. So, instead of donning my shorts, I reached instead for my sweat pants. Between that wardrobe choice, my new straw hat, and the Sunblock 8000 I'd picked up at Walmart, I was hopeful that my burn wouldn't worsen over the course of the day.

After the second programme on Saturday, Lorna had decided to scratch Derby so that she could enter her in Sunday's meet. As a young whippet, neither of us wanted to see Derby overdoing things but, on the other hand, I get to see the Whippet Princess so rarely that it seemed a good opportunity for me to watch her race.

I eagerly awaited Derby's first race and was thrilled to be able to see her break from the boxes, embarking on her very first oval race. It turned out to be a sprint race though as

the battery for the lure machine died when the lure reached the first pulley. I'd have to wait just a little bit longer while they changed the battery!

I was not disappointed. Derby handled the delay like a pro and ran her first full oval race with style. Her running style and stride astounded me. Although Lorna had kept me up-to-date on her progress as a youngster (including telling me what a great stride she had), seeing was believing. Simply put, watching her run is a thing of beauty.

Tighe's race was a good one with his brother, Odie, leading from the break. Mushka was a strong second with Tighe challenging her in third place. At the last pulley, the string broke. We'd have to re-run it!

I'd checked Tighe's toe and asked Lorna to check it as well. We both thought he looked fine. Unfortunately, I'd asked Lorna to look at the wrong toe...after the re-run, it was clear that he'd done in the next toe on his foot. He was scratched.

In the high point, Neoptolemus broke well ahead of the pack but Dayton had caught by the first corner and passed him soon thereafter. Dayton stayed as far ahead as he thought he needed to be and just maintained his speed. Neoptolemus, meanwhile, was really pouring on the gas and slowly shrinking Dayton's lead. By the end of the race, he'd caught up to within a length or two of Dayton ... just enough to give me heart palpitations! What an exciting challenge!

The first programme had been plagued by equipment issues but the Greyhound Club got them under control quickly and efficiently. Special congratulations are due to Jen on her lure operation. Using new equipment and on only her second oval meet, it took her only a couple of races to get things figured out. Awesome job, Jen!

In the second programme, Derbs had moved up to the semi-feature. Yikes! I was worried that her inexperience would work against her but she pulled it out. She broke well and led from post to wire! Again, I was thrilled to watch her run and again, I marvelled over her stride. Lorna said to me "You never saw Dusty run in his prime, did you?"

What a timely tribute to Dusty's memory.

Dayton's second race was not nearly as exciting as the first. He'd figured out Jim's timing on the boxes and broke extremely well. He just kept going and won the race with a substantial lead. In the next programme, he'd have to run with the Whippet Princess! What a dilemma! Who would I watch?

The final high point was upon us. Dayton broke well again and had a good lead by the first corner. Derby broke poorly and was trailing the other two dogs. By the time the dogs were along the backstretch, Dayton had a substantial lead so I switched my attention to Derby. She'd just passed Sunny to move into third place and was challenging Neoptolemus for second. He faltered slightly and I thought to myself "He's blown a pad".

He had but, after that first realisation, he didn't let that slow him down! He held off Derby's challenge and followed Dayton into the final corner.

As Derbs was midway through the final corner, the sound of screeching brakes broke my concentration. It was Dayton, blowing his pads. As he screeched to a halt, the dogs behind him were forced to think on the fly to get around him. Neoptolemus, being the great oval dog he is, wasn't even fazed. Derby handled the traffic like she'd been doing it all her life and immediately moved to go around the jack-knifed black dog. Sunny was just as adept at getting around Dayton.

Derby kept hauling along and crossed the finish line only a half length off Neoptolemus. What an honour for her to finish second to a dog like Neoptolemus in her very first oval meet! In the meantime, Dayton limped across the finish line on his tippy-toes.

Lorna told me later that, as she stood waiting to catch Derby after her final race, she saw her start to turn to the left. In her inexperience, Derbs didn't quite know where the finish line was and was readying herself for another trip around the track! Needless to say, Lorna and I were pretty darn pleased with Derby's first time around the oval.

Due to the equipment delays, the meet was a little longer than usual and we were later than expected getting away from the field. We crossed the border shortly after 5:00 and were hoping to make Centralia before nightfall. I'm still not sure how we did it, but we did!

From an I-5 rest area, I called ahead and had a room reserved at the Motel 6. When we arrived in Centralia, we checked in then went straight for dinner. We decided against Denny's but still ended up in a chain restaurant--Shari's. I wasn't quite willing to risk getting a bad chicken-fried steak so opted for the chili burger instead. Lynne, on the other hand, flirted with disappointment and ordered the chicken-fried steak. I made her give me a taste and was comforted to know that, if ever I needed it, a chicken-fried steak from Shari's would be a good thing.

We returned to the motel, only to find it crawling with cops. We unloaded the van and took the dogs for their nightly constitutional, all the while keeping an eye on the events. A young lad was walking back and forth to the dumpster with a garbage basket so Lynne asked him what was going on.

Apparently, he'd decided to rent a motel room in order to host a loud and raucous party. The other guests were not impressed and the boys in blue cancelled everyone's dance cards.

Although we'd missed the excitement, we took pleasure in the fact that we'd be sleeping without disturbance that night ...

[...]

The next morning we were up and on the road quickly. One of the benefits of staying in Centralia was that we would be able to stop at Spiffy's Restaurant for breakfast. We'd seen the restaurant several times on trips up and down I-5 and commented on it, since Dayton and Parker have a brother named Spiffy. Now, we'd be able to try their food!

In case of this eventuality, I'd done a little bit of research on Spiffy's and found that they were admired locally for their wonderful pies. No word about their breakfasts though ...

I decided this would be my chance to have my second chicken-fried steak of the trip. When it came, I almost wished I'd ordered pie for breakfast instead. The coating was very eggy and not seasoned much at all. Despite being billed as Certified Angus Beef, the meat was mechanically-tenderised and, as a result, was mostly mushy and shot through with fibrous stringy bits. The gravy was good though.

We pushed on, listening to books on tape, until we stopped for dinner at the Black Bear Diner in Redding. Sure that there's some law, either natural or otherwise, against eating chicken-fried steak twice in one day, I ordered a Cobb salad. Lynne relied on our old favourite, a Reuben sandwich. Neither of us were disappointed.

After fourteen hours on the road, we finally arrived at my house. In anticipation of our return, Kathleen had made orange jello for us. It was very refreshing after our long drive. We went to bed happy people...

Until next time,

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