

Orange Coast

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Simply Southern Fried Comfort



by Tina Dirmann

It was supposed to be a stress-free weekend away with five dear girlfriends. So why was I feeling so tortured?

We were in Newport Beach (posh), at the Resort at Pelican Hill (more posh), indulging in a spa retreat, including golf, some yoga, and of course, chow time. But at our lunch table, I was gripping the menu a tad too tight, causing the blood to drain from my knuckles. Already, I was consumed with guilt for what I was about to do.

First, the inevitable.

“I’ll have the Cobb salad,” my first gal pal said. “No bacon or blue cheese. And non-fat vinaigrette dressing, on the side.”

Girlfriends two through five pretty much ordered the same. Salads. Hold the fatty stuff.

But I didn’t want a salad. I couldn’t focus on anything except the lobster tails, served with three dipping sauces. And decadently deep-fried. I ordered, ignoring the eyes at the table—the ones that said “Oh my God, what is she doing?”

My friends are gorgeous women. Their “fat jeans” (all *True Religion* and *7 For All Mankind*) are a size 2. They count calories and relish bikini season. Not a muffin-top among them. At 116 pounds, I’m not exactly overweight. I work out several times a week, and I eat regular servings of fruits and vegetables. But dear Lord, how I love fried foods.

And there it is—my dark, dirty little secret: A fried-food fetish.

We all have them, those vices lurking like skeletons stashed in our proverbial closets, invisible to the world but rattling madly every time we, say, smoke a cigarette? Imbibe another cocktail? Over extend that credit card? All those things we know aren’t good for us. We do them anyway, because it hurts so good.

My skeleton waves a bony finger at me with one hand, while gripping a fried chicken leg in the other. I’m especially ashamed of my guilty pleasure because I reside in Southern California, where sushi is king, and carbs are *verboten*.

But I’m not from California. I was raised in the South, where fried cuisine qualifies as a basic food group. And not just anywhere in the South. New Orleans. Home to fried shrimp po’ boys, fried catfish platters, fried crawfish, fried oysters. And something glorious called “boo fries”—French fries covered in melted cheese and drowning in brown gravy, for those of you who have never had the pleasure. I always looked forward to the Sundays of my youth because I knew what came after the endless church services. Back home, on grandma’s glossy dining room table, sat huge platters of deep-fried goodness. First, the chicken. It was cooked to such a perfect shade of golden crispness the Colonel should hide his recipe and weep with shame. But that wasn’t my favorite. That was the country-fried okra. I’d bite in, savoring that crunchy outside, and warm, slightly sweet middle. I’d fill my little plate with chicken, okra, and a buttery homemade biscuit. Did life get any better than this? Not in my world.

My skinny friends can’t understand this, so I say nothing and usually pretend to enjoy my steamed broccoli stalks. I can do that for several meals, and even manage a contented look. But underneath, I’m near the breaking point. I know I’m going to run home to the [wondrous little temptress](#) sitting proudly on my kitchen counter.

Oh, how I love my deep-fryer. It's top of the line. Not one of those old, black metal bucket things my mom had, with the top open so that popping grease from the boiling fries and onion rings splattered onto nearby kitchen walls. No, my deep-fryer, the Presto Cool Daddy, is sleek, with a black lacquer finish and a top that snaps shut during the frying process. It even has a temperature gauge and a suggested temperature guide: 340 degrees for shrimp and vegetables; 375 for fries and chicken.

I use mine to replicate the much beloved fried okra of my childhood. It's never quite as good as Grandma's. But how I love to try.

So, what's the harm?

Well, there is this one little thing. That precious little deep-fryer of mine sits atop the same kitchen counter that holds my pills for high cholesterol and blood pressure. I have been taking them for nearly 10 years, since I was 28 years old when, during a routine physical exam, my blood pressure came in at an alarming 140/105. Cholesterol: 270.

It's genetic. My mom, four aunts, and one uncle all take pills to suppress the bad lipids and boost the healthy ones. My father, a man of excesses, just like his native New Orleans, died way too young, as did my grandmother, that sweet Southern lady with mad chicken-fried steak and gravy skills.

You'd think the sting of those losses would scare me straight, right? Sell that little fryer of mine on E-bay, because it's literally a matter of life and death? Well...if you grew up in a Catholic home, chances are, you're probably Catholic today. And you'll probably raise your kids Catholic, too. Same thing if you're Baptist or Protestant or Jewish. It's pretty much the same for me, except the dominant religion of my upbringing was a mix of Cajun Creole and Southern classics. Usually a touch spicy, typically deep-fried, and almost always covered in gravy. These foods soothe my soul.

But I'm trying. I'm reaching less often for my fried-food cookbooks. When I do deep-fry, I use healthier oils. I sometimes *bake* chicken. Whenever I'm down home, I always suggest we perhaps, maybe, just this time, try ordering a dinner salad instead of those hush puppies. I get the same dirty glares I got from my girlfriends at the Resort at Pelican Hill.

I can't win.

BIO: *Tina Dirmann is the author of "Vanished at Sea" (St. Martins Press), the true story of maritime murders off of Newport Beach, and an Orange Coast contributing writer.*