

Winging It

-Danny Plunkett

Sporting events...sticky fingers...mountains of dirty napkins piled on tiny plates. What's the common denominator? Chicken wings, and loads of them.

Wings are interesting to me. There is the obvious allure of the delicious sauce dripping off them, the satisfaction of picking one clean, and the horrifying way they can make a face look like a battleground, but there's something else. Wings are one of the only foods that I have never eaten alone... but that are horrible to eat around anyone else. Through rigorous experimentation, I have determined that it is physically impossible to finish off a plate of wings without embarrassing myself in the extreme. Drops of sauce fly everywhere, my shirt usually ends up stained beyond salvation, and my attempts to covertly lick my fingers always earn me naught but disapproving stares.

Wings are one of my favorite foods, and always have been. I try to eat them as much as possible, which is good because this has allowed me to break through the wing-guilt barrier and fully explore my wing-eating capacities without being overly self conscious. What better time to do this than wing night?

Though I'm not sure when wing nights were first born, they are now solidly entrenched in our social scene. If you've never been to one, "wing night" happens when a restaurant picks one night of the week to sell chicken wings at absurdly low prices, and in absurdly high quantities. I generally go for the sole purpose of gorging myself and regretting it after...but other people that are less food-centric (I remain a firm supporter of food-centricity) go to hang out with friends and nibble on a wing or two.

Between sports teams and friends, I have very nearly traversed the entirety of the local wing-o-sphere, visiting the majority of the nearby restaurants that offer a wing night. Based on careful observations taken in the past few years, I have broken down the elements of wing night into four categories: preparation, sauce, price, and atmosphere.

Topping off my list is O'Neil's Bar in Salem. They simply have the most mouth-watering, lip-tingling, belly-warming wings around. They prepare them perfectly (in my humble opinion), managing to create crispy, delicious wings that are neither deep-fried nor overly chewy. They also offer a fantastic selection of sauces and seasonings, including a zesty asian, honey BBQ, and three levels of spice, from buffalo to "MILK! I NEED MILK NOW!" which they never lay on too thickly. At 25 cents per wing, my teenage friends and I have no budgetary qualms when we go on Monday nights. In all, O'Neil's has constructed a minor masterpiece in each wing, and the quiet, weeknight bar atmosphere merely adds to the experience.

Most often, I go with my fellow track team members to the Three Cod Tavern in downtown Marblehead since it is a more local destination. Offering a 50-cent wing on Tuesday nights, Three Cod is significantly more expensive, but their wings make up for it in full. In contrast to O'Neil's, their wings are thoroughly breaded and deep-fried, veritably drowning in a flood of BBQ, buffalo, or teriyaki sauce. Unfortunately, Three Cod is not the perfect venue for a wing night. The tavern is a great place to get dinner, but for a rowdy group of teenagers the atmosphere can be a little awkward. I remember times when I felt guilty about disturbing the otherwise peaceful dinners of other patrons with my raucous eating.

Coming in at third on my list is the Howling Wolf Taqueria on Derby St in Salem. The Wolf is easily my favorite overall chow establishment in the surrounding towns, and their wings only increase my ardor for the place. On Wednesday nights patrons can go south of the border for only 30 cents a wing that are almost disturbingly delicious. The Wolf's tangy mexican sauce is out of this world, but it is regrettably the only wing-smothering option other than plain. The wings are not quite as crisp as I'd like, though overall their wings are just as good as the rest of their food. The high tables with stools, wafting aromas, and loud, exciting ambiance makes it a fun place to hang out and eat to your heart's content.

Buffalo Wild Wings serves just what you might expect: wild wings. A large chain, they tout more sauces and flavors for their wings than I have fingers and toes combined! BWW has fairly mastered the "sports wing," a messy, crunchy explosion of flavor that goes down nicely while you watch a game on one of their massive TVs. Even though their wings are great, the boisterous restaurant fills up quickly and I have been lost in the crowd a bit as far as service goes. The hike to the mall on a school night can also be a little arduous, especially when other options are closer to home.

Last, and in this case least, on my extremely unofficial list is the Tavern in the Square. It is a relatively new restaurant that has enjoyed immense popularity since its opening. Don't get me wrong, most of the food there passes my inspection with flying colors, and the atmosphere is definitely fun and inviting, but the wings are....neglected. Love is the key to good food,* and these wings are truly unloved. Skin: limp. Size: small. Sauce: scarce and bland. The wings are only a quarter each which improves the outlook of this wing night but it still just doesn't make the cut.

If you haven't yet, try it out! Go get some wings, chow down, and have a good time. I'll probably see you there.

*In fact, bacon is the key to good food, but love is a close second.