

Huli Huli Chicken

“Huli! Huli!” workers shout to one another as they man the 10-foot-long portable grills that dot the roads and parking lots of Hawaii, each cooking more than 30 split chickens at a time. The birds are continually basted with a sticky-sweet sauce and “huli”-ed (turned, in Hawaiian) to keep from burning. “You can stand on my deck above the city and watch for smoke on a weekend,” says Wanda Adams, cookbook author and food editor at the Honolulu Advertiser. “Head in that direction and you’re sure to find a parking lot huli huli sale.” True huli huli chicken is something home cooks buy instead of make, she adds, as the grill apparatus and incessant flipping discourage even the most adventurous grillers. BY DIANE UNGER



Since I didn't have the rig, the Hawaiian *kiawe* wood used for grilling, or the good fortune to live in Hawaii, I'd have to figure out how to make this sweet, smoky, burnished bird at home. Between cookbooks and the Internet, I found adaptations of the teriyaki-like sauce to which sweet ingredients are added.

I made, remade, adapted, developed, and tweaked. Ultimately, tasters picked a version with soy sauce, rice vinegar, ginger, garlic, chili sauce, ketchup, brown sugar, and lots and lots of pineapple juice. I boiled the sauce down until it was thick, glossy, and sweet. Then I marinated the chicken in the sauce, as most recipes instruct. But on the grill, by the time the chicken was cooked through, its skin had incinerated. Also, the meat was dry, and the marinade didn't add much flavor. (Maybe if I'd left it in the sauce overnight, it would have worked, but I was hungry now.)

Could I get my grill to mimic a Hawaiian rotisserie? Huli huli rotisseries strap chicken halves to parallel poles, suspended a ways above the coals and continually turned (think foosball). For me, high, direct heat proved a direct path to scorched chicken. Indirect heat resulted in flabby chicken skin. My best bet was a moderate number of coals (about 75) spread in a single layer over the entire grill. The direct heat rendered the fat and crisped the skin, but the chicken was far enough from the coals to avoid burning—or so I hoped.

We often brine chicken to keep it moist and flavorful. For my next test, instead of soaking the chicken in sauce, I brined it in salted water, planning to paint on the sauce on the grill. This chicken was moist, but once I started to baste, it burned yet again—not as badly as before, but still... Despite my careful grill setup, with so much sugar in the sauce the chicken didn't stand a

chance. Also, the flavor was only skin-deep. What if I used some of my sauce ingredients as a brine? I mixed together soy sauce, water, garlic, and ginger (I sautéed the last two to bring out their flavors). In another bid for flavor, I added soaked mesquite chips to the grill—kiawe is a species of mesquite. This chicken had a deep, seasoned-to-the-bone flavor.

If only I could fix that smoldering problem. Since the glaze was to blame, why not save it until the chicken came off the grill? After all, the chicken was already highly seasoned from the brine and well smoked from the wood. I grilled the chicken skin-side up to render the fat, and then turned it skin-side down to finish cooking and crisp the skin (just one turn sufficed). As soon as the chicken came off the grill, I painted on the glaze. This chicken was bronzed and beautiful, smoky, moist, sweet, and flavorful throughout.