

Review of:

Hot Hot Chicken: A Nashville Story

Rachel Louise Martin. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2021. Pp. IX + 215, acknowledgements, introduction, conclusion, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index.

Review by Sarah T. Shultz

Hot chicken—a spicy fried chicken brined in hot sauce, dredged in additional spices and oil after frying, and served on a slice of white bread topped with dill pickle slices—exploded into the mainstream in 2007, when the first annual Music City Hot Chicken Festival was held in Nashville’s East Park at the behest of then-governor Bill Purcell. Hot chicken’s uniquely spicy flavor and strong associations with Nashville have made it a major culinary tourist attraction.

Hot chicken was created in Nashville’s African American community during a time when the city was deeply segregated. As hot chicken’s popularity has increased, questions about who should be able to claim ownership of the dish have circulated, with accusations of cultural appropriation following the predominately white restaurant owners who have made the most money off of this culinary trend in recent years.

Some of this discourse surrounding hot chicken was started by the author, Rachel Louise Martin, herself. She wrote a searing article for *The Bitter Southerner* in 2015 called “How Hot Chicken Really Happened.” In this article, Martin attempted to trace hot chicken as far back as possible in Nashville’s history, and linked the meal to the city’s history of segregation and urban development. *Hot, Hot Chicken* is a continuation of this article, which appears mostly unchanged at the beginning of the book as the Introduction, where Martin first presents her argument that the city’s racial and class divisions have been “built...into our government, our schools, our food, our very landscape” (7).

Over the course of eight chapters, a conclusion, and an epilogue, Martin traces the history of five waves of urban renewal in Nashville, Tennessee, and attempts to show how these major structural changes may have affected members of the families who are said to be the inventors of hot chicken: the founding Prince family, as well as members of the Matthews family, who originally worked with the Princes before opening their own hot chicken restaurant.

The Introduction does not provide much detail about the research methodology Martin used to complete the book. Throughout the text she refers to searching historical records and occasionally provides quotes from André Prince Jeffries and Dollye Matthews, the two women who are heirs to Prince’s Hot Chicken and Bolton’s Spicy Chicken and Fish, the two oldest hot chicken restaurants in town. Providing a more detailed account of her research methodology and the intended goals of the book in the Introduction would be helpful for historians, foodways scholars, and critical race theorists looking to understand the scope of her work.

The first chapter begins prior to the end of the Civil War, and locates members of the Prince family living on a slaveholding estate called Wood Park before and after emancipation. Martin suggests that the woman who was likely the great-grandmother of Thornton Prince III, who owned the first hot chicken restaurant in Nashville, probably worked as a cook for the Sayers family, who owned Wood Park. In this chapter, Martin introduces one of the major themes of her work: the difficulty inherent in knowing anything for certain about African American history prior to the mid-nineteenth century, as Black lives and businesses were deliberately left out of the public record well into the 1950s.

The following seven chapters move chronologically, detailing five waves of urban renewal efforts that took place in Nashville and attempting to place members of the Prince and Matthews families within this larger historical framework. The Conclusion and Epilogue explore how the current state of gentrification and a round of devastating tornadoes that ravaged the city in March of 2020 continue to exacerbate segregation and inequality in Nashville.

Each of these urban renewal projects was targeted at a predominately African American neighborhood, many of which had a connection to refugee camps settled by self-emancipated people during the Civil War. Martin does an excellent job of describing how systemic inequality in Nashville led to the conditions that caused these neighborhoods to be targeted for urban renewal in the first place, and in illustrating how these projects negatively impacted the communities they were supposed to help. Detailing the number of times the Princes and Mathews were forced to move their homes, relocate or even temporarily close their restaurants over the course of the one hundred and sixty years that have passed between 1860 and the present day drives this point home effectively.

Educators looking for a source that will illustrate concepts of critical race theory and structural inequality in a way that is engaging and maintains an emphasis on the everyday experiences of the people who are most affected by this inequality will find *Hot, Hot Chicken* very useful. Chapters Four, Five, and Six, which detail how Civil Rights leaders included the issue of urban renewal in their protests against inequality, as well as their attempts to challenge these projects in court, are especially strong in showcasing how these development and renewal projects exacerbated racial inequality even when their implementers may have intended otherwise.

Martin focuses more on the story of Nashville than on hot chicken as a local dish and attraction for culinary tourists, although there are some insights about hot chicken and Southern cuisine in general throughout the book. Chapter Four describes Thornton Prince III's first hot chicken restaurant, the "BBQ Chicken Shack," as appealing to customers because it provided both nostalgic home style cooking and cutting edge industrial foods like white bread and pre-packaged pickle slices, which would have been a novelty in the 1950s. Martin also suggests that the meaning of hot chicken has changed over time, from a symbol of a lost history following the housing crisis of 2007, to one of belonging for the large numbers of newcomers who have moved into the area over the past decade. More analysis of the symbolic meanings of hot chicken would be welcome, as would

further insights into the debates on ownership of hot chicken and issues of cultural appropriation that are raised in Chapters Seven and Eight.

Hot, Hot Chicken: A Nashville Story, offers a comprehensive analysis of how decades of urban renewal and zoning projects in the city led to more and more drastic levels of segregation between Nashville's white and Black residents, as well as among its rich and poor. Choosing to focus on members of a few select families who were and continue to be affected by these changes at every turn makes this work accessible and compelling, and the choice to have those individuals be the creators of hot chicken, a trendy dish with a controversial place in current discourse, ensures that people will read the story who may not otherwise have been interested in the history of Nashville's neighborhoods and infrastructure. Because Martin takes care to provide both state and federal historical context for each urban renewal project she focuses on, *Hot, Hot Chicken* is a valuable contribution to studies of structural inequality across the United States, not just in one city in the Middle South.