

# Shelby County: Hot Brown Heaven

By Kris White  
Contributing Writer

It's a tough job, but someone has to do it. Fairs, horse shows, and vine-ripened tomatoes are coming to Shelbyville all summer long — and our entire region will be hopping with Equestrian Games attendees come September. Everyone wants to know: Where's the best hot brown in town? I'm the lucky gal who got to investigate the question.

On a sparkling spring day, a friend and I weaved our way through Louisville's city streets. People were lunching in the pretty parks amidst the skyscrapers. The hot dog stand looked fun, but we were headed to the elegant Brown Hotel, the birthplace of the hot brown. When comparing hot browns, I thought, we'd better start with the original.

Kentucky's legendary open-faced hot sandwich, layered with turkey, cheese, tomato, and bacon, was created in the 1920s in the kitchen of the Brown Hotel. Glamorous celebrities and statespeople like Elizabeth Taylor, Eva Marie Saint, the Duke of Windsor, and Harry Truman stayed at the hotel. They swung along to the sounds of the jazz bands, with the more than 1,200 guests who enjoyed the dinner dance nightly. The chefs stood ready in the very late (or shall we say early?) hours to prepare breakfast for the tired dancers. One morning, Chef Fred Schmidt decided to try something other than ham and eggs. He created the hot brown by pouring a light white sauce over scraps of leftover bread and turkey.

The hot brown at the Brown Hotel is luscious. The hotel continues the tradition of using a thin cream sauce over a thick slice of the tenderest turkey I've ever put in my mouth. The tomatoes are wide wedges of sweet Romas, rather than a thin slice of a sandwich tomato. The bread fascinated me: it was toasted, but soft and spongy. The sauce and broiling of the dish had not affected the inner feel of the bread. At first I didn't think I could, but I ate every bite and wondered if anything in Shelby County could rival this scrumptious treat.

In a cozy corner of the Bell House one Friday night, staff

members attended my and my husband's every need. Warm bread with herbed olive oil tempted me, but I was here to taste the hot brown. The Bell House's weekend menu is vast in its offerings — and tasty isn't a big enough word to describe the skills of Chef Johnny Lewis, a Shelbyville native who attended the French Culinary Institute and worked as the executive sous chef at Tavern on the Green in New York City.

"I think our hot brown is the most delicious hot brown in the world. I eat three to five of them a week. You know if the chef keeps eating a dish, it's good," laughs Lewis. And when I put his concoction of nice-size slices of turkey breast, crispy bread, and bacon and tomato in my mouth, I knew we had a contest on our hands. His cheese sauce differs from the Brown Hotel — it is rich with layers of flavor from many types of cheese, not just cream and parmesan.

"What makes our sauce so good is all the varieties of cheese. We mix our sauce nice and slow. We add each cheese one at a time for maximum flavor and to make sure the sauce is smooth, not clumpy," Lewis said. What cheeses? That's the secret. Because of the secret sauce, I liked Bell House's hot brown better than the original, I thought. I had to take another bite to really be sure. Then another. But more were ahead.

Walking up to the doors of Wakefield-Scarce Galleries, one immediately senses the grandeur of yesteryear. The property is known and loved in

our county, but its history and tranquility is perhaps not appreciated enough. I can't imagine a more peaceful setting than the indoor courtyard, listening to water trickle in the fountain, being surrounded by the finest oil paintings in the world — as if the food weren't enough a reason to wait for a table in the Science Hill Inn dining room.

"All our hot breads and desserts are made fresh daily in our kitchen," reads the menu. When the waiter set a basket of obviously handcrafted fried cornbread and buttermilk biscuits in front of me, I had to have a little taste. I couldn't wait to see what kind of bread Chef Ellen Gill chose to use in the hot brown.



The writer and her friend Vanessa Clemmons enjoyed some hot browns.



It did take some effort to resist the Kentucky Bibb Lettuce entrée, but everything about Science Hill's hot brown was as irresistible as the breadbasket. They use toasted bread, soft on the inside but thick enough to stand up to the layers of sauce and meat. Chunks and cuts of fresh-roasted turkey reminded me of the original — and reminded me that there is something special about the texture and taste of the big bird straight from the oven.

Science Hill's cheese sauce was thicker and creamier than the Brown Hotel's, but less cheesy than the Bell House. Instead, cheeses were sprinkled on top of the entire dish — even the bacon — and broiled into a bubbly, chewy topping, a different style of layering than other places. The only thing I was left wanting was a bit more tomato and more room in my pants!

Just down the road from my house, gourmet dining lives in an unexpected place. The Old Stone Inn in Simpsonville, one of Shelby County's oldest occupied buildings, offers fine Southern cuisine on elegant plating. They use locally grown produce and herbs whenever possible and also feature local musicians weekly on the patio this summer.

Named of the seven signature restaurants across our state by the Kentucky Department of Travel, the food and atmosphere is not to be missed — especially the hot brown. Of the dishes I've tasted thus far, none has used country ham. When I dug my fork into Old Stone Inn's version of the hot brown, an enormous platter piled high with shredded fresh-baked turkey and a thick slice of country ham, I honestly wondered if I would like their version as much. Would the ham take away from the bacon experience? Would the taste of it overpower the subtle sauce?

All doubts vanished with the first bite. The sauce was exquisite, and the ham, mild and tender, provided a terrific pairing with the Texas toast foundation.

Claudia Sanders Dinner House also uses country ham in their version of the Kentucky Hot Brown. In fact, when I cut into Claudia's hot brown, I realized that this dish is all about the ham and less about the turkey. The foundation of their dish is a buttery croissant. Even the biggest appetite will be satisfied with the hearty cheese sauce. And because the dish is served with a nice-portion salad, the meal is a great value.

McKinley's Bread Shop and Deli offer hot browns, too. I've heard rave reviews about them — "killer" was the exact word. McKinley's hot browns are only available during winter months, but they have a hot turkey and Swiss with poppy seed dressing that can stop any craving for a melty turkey sandwich in its tracks.

When I started the search for Shelbyville's favorite hot brown, I didn't realize how hard

it would be to narrow it down. Some ring my bell more than others, but to really determine a winner, I'll have to make the rounds again. Before I do, maybe I should feature the county's best fitness trainers ...

### Family-Friendly Hot Browns

Don't have time to slow roast a turkey breast? Try this quicker, easier recipe to delight even the pickiest family member. When my 7-year-old put a bite in her mouth, she looked at me and said, "Mommy, this is goood."

#### Whisk Sauce for Six

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 ¼ cups of milk (not skim)
- 1 ¼ cups of whipping cream
- ½ cup water
- ½ cup white cheddar or white American cheese (whichever is your favorite)
- ½ cup of parmesan and/or Romano cheese
- ¼ cup of mozzarella cheese, shredded
- ¼ teaspoon garlic powder

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**NO JOB IS TOO BIG FOR THIS CREW.**

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