

In the cold, campers hold hope for free Joella's Hot Chicken

Annie Aguiar | Jan. 24, 2019

Lit by the glow of the drive-thru sign, a line of tents circled Joella's Hot Chicken in the January cold.

It's a promotion Joella's does for the grand opening of every new restaurant, and the new Bloomington location on Third Street was no different: the first 100 people in line at 8 a.m. Thursday would receive 52 coupons, each redeemable for a purchase of \$9.50 or less. Used once a week, as per the coupons' instructions, that's a year's worth of free chicken platters.

Bloomington's chicken hopefuls gathered their sleeping bags, tents, blankets, propane tanks and hand warmers. What, just sit outside a restaurant for a day in exchange for free chicken for a year?

Easy.

IU sophomores Hannah Frebel and Kelly Berry were first in line Wednesday night, camped out in a red and gray tent.

They heard about the promotion on Instagram and bought a tent Tuesday night. The two set up their tent at 7:30 a.m. Wednesday in the rain. They bought towels to mop up water inside the tent. They both had classes Wednesday, so they took shifts on tent duty to avoid losing their spot.

"I asked a lot of my friends to do it with us," Berry said. "They were like – "

"You're psychopaths," Frebel said.

The glass doors to Joella's sat a couple feet away from their tent flap, offering a peek into the sleek red and yellow interior of the restaurant. They could see a sign on the wall shouting "HOT" as they sat in feel-it-in-your-fingers, need-to-wear-extra-socks, 27-degree weather. It was only going to get colder, with the night's low hitting 21. Later, it snowed.

Inside, the floor was painted with a red silhouette of a chicken on a circular yellow background. The paint was not yet dry on the tail feathers of the Joella's logo.

Joella's isn't the only chicken place in town. The new Bloomington location is flanked by competitors; a KFC sits across the street, and some of the campers were eating dinner from the Chick-fil-A next door. Many of the campers, including Berry and Frebel, had never actually eaten at a Joella's Hot Chicken before.

But still, they flocked to the parking lot. For the chicken, yes, but also for the story.

Three friends sat on the asphalt by the perimeter of the restaurant, huddled under blankets. Anna Nelson, 21, and Laura Ziegler, 21, are headed to Thailand on Feb. 2 for two months on a mission

trip. They decided to camp out at Joella's with a third friend, 19-year-old Jazmyn Sanders, just to say they did it.

"Just think about it," Nelson said. "For years to come, I'll be able to tell my children that I waited in the cold for hours for chicken."

The three drove from Columbus, Indiana, with Sanders behind the wheel. On the way, she said, she blew a stop sign. A police officer pulled them over.

He walked up to the window.

"I'm sorry, I'm just really excited about free chicken," Sanders told the officer.

He let them off with a warning.

Some campers sat in parked cars instead of the cold, a contingent that many of the tent-dwellers described as cheaters. Others spent the night in less conventional camping accommodations.

On the other side of Joella's, a man sat with a blue tarp covering his body and a jug of apple cider at his feet. He was so still most of his fellow campers assumed he was asleep. The man in the tarp declined a request for comment.

Alliayah Mays, 20, had no tent or car with her. Her set up for the night was two blankets, a small pillow and a bottle of white cherry Gatorade, all laid out on the parking lot asphalt. She also brought a 21-ounce cup from McDonald's to pee in, but decided she didn't need it after seeing the trees surrounding the restaurant.

"I can barely afford to pay my rent, so buying groceries is a hassle," she said. "I'm balling on a budget, so free food for a year would really help out."

She said she was too cheap to buy a tent, but she felt like her fingers were about to fall off. If it got too miserable, she said, she would just leave. Her friends had tried to talk her out of staying the night.

"They said this is some white bullshit," she said. "Only white people camp out for some bullshit in the cold."

At 11:30 p.m., hopefuls were still arriving. With no way to know if they were within the 100-person parameter, all they could do was wait and see.

For entertainment, Joella's hired DJ KG, a member of the DJ group Spinnin' Sauce, to play music for the campers. DJ KG stayed warm inside the restaurant as music blared over speakers to the outside world.

In the morning, before the doors opened and the promised poultry passes were distributed, campers formed a single-file line outside the door as Bruce Rosenblatt, regional director of operations for Joella's Hot Chicken, addressed the crowd.

"When I say 'hot,' you say 'chicken,'" Rosenblatt said into a microphone, his voice booming from the speakers. "Hot!"

The crowd yelled in response: "Chicken!"

"I can't hear you," he said. "HOT!"

"CHICKEN," they screamed, with all the force of a hungry, half-frozen horde.

"CHICKEN," they roared, like a loud prayer from a rowdy congregation.

Then, at last, chicken.