



Dish: **Chicken
Tenders Basket**

Location:
the COOP,
**Little Caesar's
Arena**

Price: **\$22**



by **MICHAEL HIRSCH**

I swear basketball has been the most consistent thing in my life. Through all the turmoil, trauma, and miscellaneous nonsense, professional basketball has kept me grounded. I can thank the Goin' To Work era Pistons for reaching 6 consecutive conference finals and ultimately winning a championship during the early years of my identity consolidation—Chauncey, Rip, Big Ben, and Sheed were there. They created a gravity so strong that I have devoted a disproportionate amount of brainspace to basketball and related topics.

During the dark times of our franchise's history I was able to attach myself to the magnificence of how Nikola Jokic painted plays on the court not dissimilarly in process to how I imagine greats like Francis Bacon or Van Gogh were able to do on canvas. Bright flashes of creativity and genius. The number of times I've watched that man in total shock could not be counted on even the most heavily beaded abacus. I love basketball. I often refer to the Pistons as my personal friends despite me never having exchanged a single word with anyone on the active roster.

If I want to cry I can go on YouTube and watch Ben Wallace's jersey retirement. Hearing an earth shatteringly loud gong blast over the arena's speakers as PA announcer Mason screams the battlecry "DEEEEEETROITTT BAAAASKETBALLLLL" makes me well up. Seriously. I am nearly crying as I write this. Ben Wallace embodies everything a person should strive to be. Undersized and limited in his offensive abilities, he worked himself through sheer will to become one of the greatest defenders of all time and a hall of fame player. He was undrafted, went to a junior college, and was discounted at nearly every turn of his career. I think about him often and try to impart myself with a sliver of the conviction he had throughout his career.



Now that I find myself back in Detroit I have the luxury of attending games in person on a regular basis and thanks to all of those years of garbage play, the tickets are still reasonably cheap, which is how I ended up buying center court mezzanine seats 2 weeks ago for the low low price of \$25. Yes, we were playing the Utah Jazz, one of the least exciting teams in the league, but at least I could see my friends in action. I rolled myself over to Little Caesar's Arena—maybe one of the worst named venues in all of professional sports. The food offerings are a match made in heaven with the brand of Little Caesar's. Fast, cheaply made, expensive as hell.

Darting around the concourse after the first time out I spotted The Coop, an outpost serving up chicken tenders brought to you by the lovely people over at Tyson. How complicated could it be, eh? Chicken tenders are delicious and simple, just keep frying 'em up assembly line style and serving 'em out, right? No. Of course not. Things can't be so simple.



A timeout pauses gameplay for two-and-thirty-seconds. My excursion for premade chicken tenders somehow lasted twenty-five minutes. I arrive in line, pure chaos. A group of women clad in shiny puffers and leggings were in front of me, unclear if they had ordered or not. Only two of the six total registers were being worked despite there being at least fifteen employees behind the counter. I prodded the workers with a coy and slightly desperate “hey, can I order?” to no avail. I got an employee’s attention and he told me to hold on, he had to ask if they could take my order. He promptly joined a conversation with co-workers behind him, gawking over some instagram reels. The crowd inside the arena roared. Ausar Thompson, along with his twin brother are perhaps the most athletic specimens the league have ever seen, stole the ball for a fastbreak dunk. I checked the ESPN play-by-play, I can’t believe I missed it.

As the minutes ticked by, desperation grew. Nobody was paying attention to me. The first quarter was nearly over and I felt like a mute child who had just soiled himself. I was stoned and severely needed some tenders. To no avail. The charivari behind the counter was insurmountable for this customer. I switched registers and huffed and puffed until a worker reluctantly took my order. Simply 3 tenders and fries, tap to pay, \$22 gone from my account and into that of the Ilitch family (owners of the arena). It took all of thirty seconds to hand me my food, begging the question; what the hell, bro?!?

The Coop advertises their special tender sauce, which looks like an orangish-pink mayo-based number heavily inspired by Raising Cane’s. A perfect tangy mess punctuated with a semi-kick of cajun heat would’ve been the perfect accompaniment to my tenders. They were out. It was the first quarter. How do you run out of sauce before half time?? Madness.

I was subjugated to use the pump-able vats of Heinz dipping sauces on a rolling cart in the hallway. I’m a native Michigander at a professional sporting event in Detroit –you’d think there’d be a stall dedicated specifically to the art of ranch dressing. In a wicked reversal of fate I was now confined to pumping industrially-compounded, lab-formulated, polymerized, hydrogenated, and reconstituted “Ranch Product” into paper ramekins.



The oil from the “Ranch Product” soaked the ramekin making it translucent as I precariously placed it onto the messy pile of tenders in the worst Cirque-du-Soleil trapeze act ever conceived.

Ultimately I am just a man. A man alone at a professional basketball game with a basket of chicken tenders. Do you expect me to walk all the way back to my seat before trying one? That would be ridiculous. I picked up a tender, golden brown, well-constituted, smelling of fry-grease and seasoning then dunked it into my overly-engineered gelatinized ranch. The crunch was solid, the flavor was good and the ranch sucked ass. There’s no way this could be worth \$22, but here I was, the sucker hunched over a rolling cart of dipping sauces in a hallway as professionals are gazelling around a basketball court doing things I can only do in my most lucid of dreams. I am a goblin and they are gladiators. The tenders were aight, but some real sauce could’ve at least made it a worthwhile experience, instead I missed a couple good dunks and overheard the co-worker drama between the service workers at Little Caesar’s Arena. Mucho lame. I can never be fully upset when I’m surrounded by my friends and loved ones, even if they’ve never met me before. All of our championship banners and memorabilia from all those good times we shared made me feel at home, so for that it was redeemable.

I must clarify that this is not my stuff and I am not related to any Pistons players present or past. We did, however, win the game, and at the time of writing this we are on an 11-game win streak, the fourth longest in franchise history!

On the way out I ran into one of my favorite waitresses at the diner I’m a regular at. She was working one of the stalls as a second job. A single mother who escaped the Balkans in the 90s is now working to put her two children through school. We snapped a selfie and exchanged pleasantries. We’ve lived such different lives and have such different expectations from our day-to-day life. I’m just a stoner who attends basketball games. No obligations in the whole world. I was thankful for my \$22 tenders and the chance to watch my boys play the game we all love.

