



# TIDINGS of Comfort AND JOY

**Innovative twists on traditional favorites bring a sense of security and value in uncertain times.**

Comfort food has been big in restaurants for going on four years now. That's a pretty substantial length of time for something to remain popular in an industry where trends like cupcakes, pomegranates, and molecular gastronomy appear and disappear overnight.

Some publications, like Eater NY, declare that comfort food is "officially dead" while others insist it's still going strong. We decided to clear up this comfort food confusion, so you can be sure to keep it current as the weather gets colder, the holidays grow nearer, and customers crave heartier foods. The moral of the story is this: customers still do want comfort foods – they just want them served up in unexpected ways.

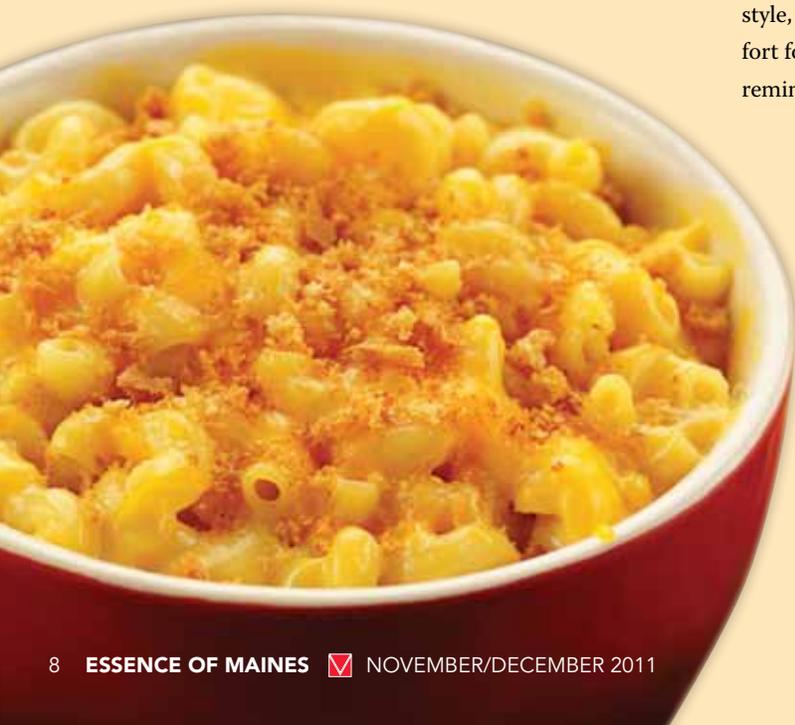
## **Customers crave old-time favorites made new...**

Merriam-Webster defines comfort food as "food prepared in a traditional style, having a nostalgic or sentimental appeal." One of the reasons comfort food brings comfort is that it leaves people feeling full and happy and reminds them of times at home and childhood.

But it's not just the sentimental associations of these dishes that bring us comfort. Numerous medical studies suggest that fatty foods actually change our brain chemistry, altering our response to sadness. Psychiatrist Dr. Lukas Van Oudenhove injected fatty acids directly into subjects' stomachs and then exposed them to sad or neutral images and music. The people did not know whether they'd received fat or saline, but those who received the fat experienced a reduced sense of sadness compared to those who received saline. The fat literally comforted them.

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—Bonny Wolf  
NPR food commentator



Whether due to nostalgia or brain chemistry, the comforting nature of these traditional favorites explains why they are the go-to foods when times get tough – and why they’ve remained steadily popular in restaurants over the last few years. “We’re in uncertain times, and this is the time when we crave comfort food,” explained NPR food commentator Bonny Wolf.

The comfort food trend is far from dead and the recession is playing a big role in its vitality. “Comfort, value, and simplicity,” Wolf says, sum up what customers want when faced with a lackluster economy. However, don’t think you can whip up Mom’s stroganoff recipe, feature it as a daily special, and call it a day. Customers’ desire for value is the catch here, and to provide that value you need to infuse a bit of creativity into your comfort cuisine.

## Not your grandma’s cooking.

The key to maximizing profits from comfort food is to deliver value, whether real or perceived. Use humble and homey favorites like lasagna, meatloaf, and pot roast as the foundational concepts for your menu items, but deliver them with innovative twists by incorporating fresher, lighter ingredients and flavors. Give your customers comfort cuisine they wouldn’t make at home.

“It (shouldn’t) be exactly like your grandma’s,” explained Bonny Wolf. Customers are looking for “slightly more sophisticated twists,” she said, such as “artisan cheese mixed in with your mashed potatoes...less butter, [and] more vegetables.” Wolf is spot on.

## Produce will likely play a critical role in your updated comfort offerings for two reasons:

1. Produce is often less expensive than protein, so if you substitute vegetables for meat wherever possible, it can reduce your food costs. That’s why you probably keep hearing the phrase “produce is the new center of plate.”
2. Unexpected flavors and fresh ingredients increase the perceived value of your dishes. Vegetables add variety and, in turn, value to your dish’s flavor palette. They also add a freshness for which customers are willing to pay a little more.

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Below are some unexpected ideas to transform traditional favorites into modernized menu items.

- To further up the freshness factor and reduce protein portions, serve with a side of leafy greens, such as a simple spinach salad with candied pecans, gorgonzola, and a sherry-shallot vinaigrette.
- Serve individual turkey meatloaves with wild mushrooms and rosemary alongside a cranberry couscous salad.
- Treat guests to vegetable or seafood lasagna made with homemade pasta or ricotta.
- Spice up a winter evening with a white chicken chili that incorporates jalapenos, white beans, and roasted garlic.
- Slow-cook pot roast with pearl onions, Swiss chard, and sweet potatoes or herb dumplings.
- Cash in on the Asian fusion trend by making a chicken noodle soup that resembles a Vietnamese Pho Ga. Use vermicelli for the noodles and don't forget the fresh ginger, bean sprouts, chili, lime, and basil. Or try a Baja version topped with avocado and sour cream.
- Satisfy customers with a savory stroganoff made with portobellos and green beans, Greek yogurt, shallots, white wine, and dill.
- Ladle out a delicious beef stew by combining sirloin, beef stock, red wine, and stout for a flavorful broth. Then freshen up with water chestnuts, diced tomatoes, parsley, and baby corn. Serve in a broad, shallow bowl.
- Serve homemade ice creams or yogurts in unexpected flavors such as green tea, lavender, or Chilean chocolate with a hint of chili powder. Top with fruit or sprig of fresh herb.



*Be their source of comfort*  
while satisfying their cravings, and  
you're sure to gain a repeat customer.