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# Global Consumer Trends

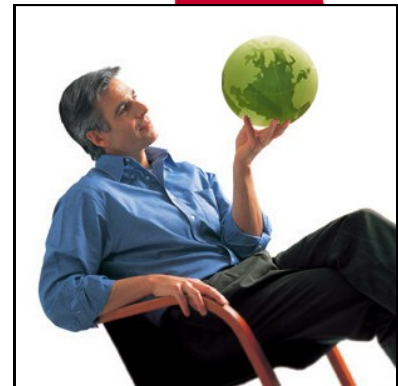
## Comfort Foods



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▶ **INTRODUCTION**

“Comfort” is a simple word that means so many things to different consumers. Among the numerous definitions of comfort, the following excerpts from the Canadian Oxford Dictionary are perhaps the most telling:

- ▶ things that contribute to physical ease and well-being;
- ▶ a person or thing that gives consolation in a difficult situation, and/or alleviates grief.

Furthermore, according to Mintel, an international market research corporation, comfort foods can be defined as food or drink products consumers turn to for temporary relief, a sense of security, or as a sort of reward. Comfort food preferences are generally defined in childhood and carried into adulthood, based on the food’s familiarity and association with pleasant memories or simplicity.

It is no wonder then, that the concept of comfort food is a popular global consumer trend, characterized by recipes and styles of cooking, both old and new. Seeking comfort in food remains important as a result of political, economic and technological change or upheaval. The more complex life gets, the more consumers tend to seek escape through reminders of simpler, less chaotic times. The concept of comfort food refers to an emotional response to food. This trend shows no signs of dwindling as there will always be a human need for comfort in any form.

Comfort foods are largely characterized by carbohydrate-heavy foods, perhaps due to the “opiate-like” effect, or state of relaxation these foods are said to induce in the brain (Mintel, 2007). However, while a preference for simple or complex carbohydrates may be a common thread, ultimate preferences play out differently in different areas of the world. Comfort foods can include such diverse offerings as macaroni and cheese, lasagne, mashed potatoes with gravy, bangers and mash, congee, rice pudding, chicken noodle soup, or ramen noodles. The concept is fuelled by constant change, interpersonal relationships, the uncertainty of economic times, and simply, the complexity of the individual consumer. With so many of the world’s economies in recession, the need for consumers to seek comfort in the foods they eat is on the rise.

This report will focus on the foods that consumers choose to find comfort in, regardless of whether the need is triggered by stress, emotional upheaval, or nostalgia.

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▶ **DID YOU KNOW?**

Comfort food made headlines in August 2010 when guests at the wedding of Chelsea Clinton (the daughter of former United States President Bill Clinton), and Marc Mezvinsky were treated to snacks of grilled cheese sandwiches, brownies and popcorn for their rides home (Bielski, 2010).

## ▶ AN OVERVIEW OF COMFORT FOOD



There are likely as many theories about *why* consumers search out specific comfort foods, as there are comfort foods themselves. The emotional side of the concept is simply stated by film critic, Roger Ebert, who writes,

“A downstate Illinois boy loves the Steak 'n Shake as a Puerto Rican loves rice and beans, an Egyptian loves falafel, a Brit loves bangers and mash, an Indian loves tikki ki chaat, a Swede loves herring, a Finn loves reindeer jerky, and a Canadian loves bran muffins...These matters do not involve taste. They involve a deep-seated conviction that a food is absolutely right, and always has been, and always will be,” (as quoted by Severson, August 2010).

Despite these seemingly national preferences, food choices have expanded well beyond consumers' country of residence. With globalization, travel, changing demographics and immigration patterns, preferred comfort foods could range from chocolate cake, tomato soup or meat loaf, to quesadillas, curry or kimchi.



Source: Shutterstock

According to a 1998 Cornell University Food and Brand Lab study, choice of comfort food also depends on the consumer's age and sex. While men, women and young adults all chose ice cream as a preference, men generally favoured savoury items such as soup, pizza and pasta, as did adults in the 35 to 54 age group. Women generally preferred sweets such as chocolate and cookies, while consumers over 55 years of age tended to prefer more traditional selections like soup and mashed potatoes (Toops).

A June 2009 study by the Center for Culinary Development and Packaged Facts also proposes that preferences in comfort foods are being driven by the age of the consumer. Although consumers of all ages prefer sweets according to this study, Boomers like exotic flavours, while Generation Y consumers seek comfort in pho (a Vietnamese beef soup), sushi, as well as Indian and Thai curries. Boomers and Gen Xers also seek to balance indulgent comfort foods with versions that use more healthful ingredients, such as fresh vegetables, whole grains, and leaner meats (Montuori).

From a scientific point of view, researchers at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) identified a biochemical feedback system in rats suggesting that comfort food plays a key role in turning off the body's response to chronic stress. This research also proposes that when a body is under constant or chronic stress, glucocorticoids send signals to the brain that bring about a heightened sense of threat detection. These signals also boost a desire for high-energy foods, to promote physical readiness in case a response to such threats is required (UCSF, 2003). As a result of evolution, consumers in modern society do not typically require a physical response to stress, but consuming such food still alleviates the body's need for maintaining a heightened state of readiness. Comfort food helps deal with stress by signalling to the brain that one's body is sufficiently prepared.



Source: Shutterstock



Source: Mintel GNPD

### Food Discomfort

One must not forget that there are consumers for whom certain foods are eaten from necessity, and not as a source of stress relief, or as a pleasurable reminder of better times (Ewing, 2008; Rock et al., 2008). In particular, the perception of macaroni and cheese, and Kraft Dinner in particular, is viewed differently depending on a consumer's level of financial security. For food-secure consumers, it may be seen as a somewhat nostalgic food for its simplicity, consistent quality, taste and ease of storage. While food-insecure or lower-income consumers may view it in similar terms, it can also be perceived to be a food of last resort, mainly relied upon in times of financial distress (Rock et al., 2008).





Despite the more scientific findings, the predominant view is that food often serves to alleviate stress because consumers know how to find the foods that bring them comfort (Diesing). However, another perspective is shown by the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab. The results of a survey conducted by Cornell indicated that its participants associated comfort foods with positive feelings and moods. Rather than seeking comfort foods when they felt depressed or lonely, participants were more likely to consume them when they were happy or wanted to reward themselves. However, the importance of comfort foods remained. For example, the survey also found that completely depriving one's self of these "guilty pleasures," a term generally attributed to sugary or high-calorie comfort foods, could lead to dieting failure. The study suggested that eating smaller portions or healthier variations of the foods consumers crave would be better strategies to avoid the feelings of deprivation that largely result in a failed diet plan (Wansink, Cheney, Chan, 2003; Wansink, 2007).

To add to the complexity of consumer behaviour, another theory proposes that the opposite of the Cornell study is true. That is to say that some consumers seek out unfamiliar or new foods, when faced with stress and change (Cloud). A study by Stacy Wood in the Journal of Consumer Research (2010) further indicates that consumers will look for new options in times of change, rather than old favourites. However, consumers do not always act how they say they will. As a result, offering variety may be a good strategy to attract some consumers. As Wood found, impulse purchases were frequently in favour of new and different foods, but consumers who took time to think over their choices did frequently choose the tried and true, traditional favourite.



Source: Shutterstock

### Comfort Food in Japan

The emotional value of comfort food was highlighted in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan in March 2011. In the aftermath, many affected Japanese sought solace as well as emergency provisions from their food supplies. Immediately after the earthquake struck, stores of all sizes were quickly sold out of staple foods like bread, as well as foods with a long shelf life, such as instant ramen noodles.

Truckloads of instant ramen, including "cup noodles" donated by instant noodle maker Nissin Foods, formed part of the relief sent into the earthquake zone. A representative of Nissin Foods commented that "people feel safer just by buying cup noodles," (Kageyama). Although the lack of nutritional content in instant ramen noodles is widely criticized, the availability and convenience, not to mention the appeal, of hot food were of higher immediate priority among the earthquake victims (Severson, 2011; Meehan, 2011).



Source: Mintel GNPD

With this in mind, a coalition of Tokyo-area chefs, like Ivan Orkin, joined forces to bring hot food relief to the earthquake zone. Their goal is to truck food to Sendai and other hard-hit areas. Once there, they intend to prepare 2,000 portions of fresh ramen noodles on-site every week for a year, in an effort to bolster morale, bring a measure of comfort, and a sense of normalcy. As Orkin stated, "it's not just [about] food-in-belly...Ramen is the comfort food of Japan. I think if we can get them a bowl of hot soup and noodles, maybe they can feel like everything's going to be OK at some point." These chefs are following in the footsteps of predecessors who supplied noodles as food relief after the 2007 earthquake in Niigata (Meehan, 2011).



Source: Shutterstock

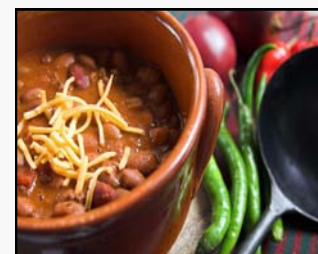
## ► TRENDS IN COMFORT FOOD



According to a September 2009 Datamonitor report, nostalgia still guided product choice for a global average of 20% of consumers, who indicated that they were slightly more or much more likely to have purchased grocery items for their nostalgic appeal. In Europe, this nostalgic consumption ranged from a low of 11% in Germany, to 14% in the Netherlands, and 36% in Spain. Consumers who made no changes in purchasing based on nostalgic appeal, ranged from 53% in Spain, to 66% in Germany and the United States (U.S.), and 71% in the Netherlands, where the global average was 64%.

In contrast, the Datamonitor report also indicated that 30% of global consumers were more or significantly more likely to have tried food and drinks with new and exotic flavours in the six months prior to the survey. In Asia Pacific, this proportion ranged from a low of 14% in Japan, to a high of 68% in India.

The global average of those who made no changes with respect to trying new and exotic foods was 53%, ranging from a low of 16% in India, to a high of 69% in Japan. In Europe, consumers in Germany and the Netherlands were the most likely to have tried new and exotic-flavoured foods less frequently over the preceding six months (47% and 25%, respectively), marking a preference for more traditional tastes. Furthermore, 64% of consumers in the Netherlands, 65% in the United Kingdom, and 61% in France were not looking to experiment with new tastes, having made no changes in their flavour selections in the six months prior to the survey (Datamonitor, 2009).



Source: Shutterstock

Culinary Tides founder and food trends forecaster Suzy Badaracco has also studied comfort foods, and released a report in which she predicts that food choices will be shifting away from comfort foods. Instead, she posits that food trends will move toward experimentation with new foods and flavours, as consumers show more optimism that the economic crisis is waning (FastCasual.com).



Source: Mintel GNPD

Nonetheless, although conflicting opinions about the direction and popularity of comfort foods still abound, this trend continues to evolve. This dichotomy is expected to continue adapting to the ever-changing demands of consumers. One needs to look no further than celebrity chefs, restaurants, and grocery-store shelves to see the influences of consumers' diversified definition of comfort food. However, it is important to note that while comfort is an important consideration, it is not necessarily the main selling point of a dish or food product.

While some products carry claims or names geared specifically toward comfort, such as Comfort Classics by Stouffer's Lean Cuisine, or Weight Watchers Home Comforts from Heinz, comfort foods are not always marketed as such. A number of processed food products do use the term "comfort" in the product description or name, however, this seems to be the exception rather than the norm.

Adding to the confusion, the term "comfort" is used in numerous contexts within product descriptions and claims, ranging from "classic comfort food" to "gut comfort," or "comfortable use." A Mintel analysis explains that claims aimed at the consumer's emotions have a direct correlation with "comfort foods." An examination of product claims compiled from Mintel shows a variety of potential "comfort-associated" claims. These are often used in combination to appeal to a wider consumer audience, and include:

- ▶ nostalgic, authentic
- ▶ gourmet
- ▶ use of the finest, freshest or natural ingredients
- ▶ quality, flavour, value
- ▶ certified organic, certified halal, certified kosher
- ▶ microwavable
- ▶ low in fat
- ▶ vegetarian
- ▶ free from colours, flavours, additives, preservatives or hydrogenated fat



Comfort food classics seem to be timeless in their appeal to consumers. In a North American context, foods such as macaroni and cheese, meatloaf, grilled cheese sandwiches, apple pie, and chocolate cake can be found in many restaurants and diners. International classics such as congee, steak and kidney pie, and lasagne, to name a few, are increasingly common among the global community. The common theme is the preparation of these dishes with time-honoured methods and basic traditional ingredients for consistent results.



Source: Mintel GNPD

For consumers who want to update their concepts of comfort food, restaurants and other foodservice establishments are ready to lead the way. Among the top food trends for 2011 identified by the National Restaurant Association, the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, and Good Housekeeping magazine, is a new emphasis on the ingredients used to prepare comfort foods, and variations on the traditional (Sweenie, 2011; Helm, 2011). While some restaurants continue to prepare traditional comfort foods using time-honoured methods, for others, ingredient substitutions are key to updating classic dishes. This modernization of comfort food may come in different forms, ranging from the substitution of a higher quality key ingredient (bleu cheese macaroni and cheese, for example), to entire gourmet makeovers. The following pages of this report outline some of the directions that are being taken.

### Vegetarian Comfort Food

Vegetarian and vegan versions of comfort foods also have a following. It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of vegetarians in Canada and the U.S., due to each consumer's own interpretation of the term. However, a 2009 poll estimated that approximately 3% of U.S. adults were vegetarian (Vegetarian Resource Group), and according to the Dietitians of Canada and the American Dietetic Association, an estimated 4% of Canadian adults are vegetarian (as referenced by the Government of Alberta). In addition, the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association named vegan entrées as a Menu Trend for 2011, while notable trends in produce are locally grown, organic, superfruits, exotic mushrooms and heirloom tomatoes.



Source: Shutterstock



Sources: Mintel GNPD; Shutterstock

Meatless versions of traditional favourites are becoming increasingly easy to find. Substitutions for meat can include tofu or a variety of vegetables. Professional chefs, and prominent television personalities such as Martha Stewart, have paid attention to the vegetarian market and created revamped versions of traditional comfort foods such as meatless shepherd's pie, vegan macaroni and cheese, vegetarian black bean chilli, eggplant parmesan, roasted vegetable lasagna, or veggie burgers with tahini mayonnaise (Stewart).





## Nostalgia

The concept of nostalgia takes many forms, from the popularity of traditional classics, to a return-to-the-past marketing approach, as is being used by soft drink brands Pepsi Throwback and 7-Up Retro, for example. As the saying goes, “everything old is new again.”

With respect to comfort food, nostalgia is reflected in the basic simplicity of classics such as meatloaf, chicken soup, and macaroni and cheese. However, restaurants and chefs continue to put innovative spins on such offerings, as product differentiation is a challenge while also trying to maintain the use of traditional ingredients and preparation methods.

For example, *The Meatloaf Bakery*, a Chicago restaurant, was inspired to combine comfort food with the cupcake trend. The result was meatloaf in the shape of cupcakes, decorated with mashed potatoes as icing (O’Neill). For lovers of rice pudding, New York City’s *Rice to Riches* offers versions of this traditional comfort food with flavour variations such as “Chocolate Chip Flirt,” “Fluent in French Toast,” and “Take me to Tiramisu.” In addition to a variety of premium ingredient combinations including strawberry-banana, pistachio-sage, and pineapple-basil, consumers have the convenience of purchasing directly from the parlour or through the shop’s website (Bernstein; Rice to Riches). Other twists on a traditional classic can be found at *Reggie’s Old Fashioned Sandwiches* in Toronto, and *Society Restaurant and Lounge* in Vancouver (2010). *Reggie’s* offers consumers deep-fried macaroni and cheese sticks, described as “the ultimate comfort food,” that have remained one of the restaurant’s most popular options since their menu debut in 2008. At *Society*, consumers can indulge in mac-and-cheese balls, made with six kinds of gourmet cheese, and a hint of heat from jalapeño peppers. These menu innovations combine the nostalgic appeal of traditional comfort foods with the novelty of convenience and taste variations.



Source: Shutterstock



Source: Mintel GNPD

## Premiumization and Indulgence

Comfort food in and of itself can be seen as a sort of indulgence, but some consumers are seeking out even more concentrated forms of enjoyment, be it through small luxury purchases, or premium twists on old favourites. For example, indulging in a high-end, high-calorie, or high-sugar treat, but in a smaller size that allows for portion control and affordability. Alternatively, substituting one or more high-quality ingredients in a typical dish can satisfy consumers’ desire for premium flair. A grilled cheese sandwich can be transformed by preparing it with more gourmet ingredients, such as a different cheese, a more premium cheese, or a mixture of fine cheeses. A poutine can become rather up-scale with the addition of lobster or pulled pork, and a burger prepared with elk or bison seems a step up from the more typical beef preparation (Simmons).

According to Mintel (2011), consumers are also less particular about *where* they get their indulgence, and are even opting to prepare their favourite dishes or treats at home. Some restaurant chains or recognized brand names have their own grocery product lines, and many food manufacturers are producing “restaurant-quality,” or otherwise premium goods, allowing consumers to re-create the quality without the service charge.



## Cupcakes: Capitalizing on the Comfort Trend

Cupcakes are one of the most fashionable baked items in the U.S., overtaking cookies as the treat of choice for both adults and children. A major reason for cupcakes’ recent surge in popularity in the U.S. is the recession, with consumers seeking comforting foods that are both indulgent and affordable. The recent popularity of cupcakes has spawned the emergence of thousands of small specialist bakeries offering their own take on the concept, with many unique frosting and cake flavours. While the U.S. remains a cupcake stronghold, the item has the potential to translate well in other countries influenced by American culture (Datamonitor, July 2009).



## Health and Wellness

Comfort foods are traditionally higher in fat and sugar, and are less healthy food options that make the consumer “feel good” (Topping). How, then, does comfort food fit into a consumer’s search for healthy food choices? While consumers endeavour to make overall healthier food choices, it is human nature to crave a reward for good behaviour (Toops, 2008). However, not all comfort-seeking consumers prefer sheer indulgence. Many consumers are looking for a balance, such as comfort foods with a more healthy approach, that still taste good. There is opportunity for industry to respond to this dilemma by reformulating traditional foods to reduce levels of sodium, fat, sugar, and calories or by substituting more healthy ingredients, such as high-fibre pasta in place of regular pasta.

Alternatively, there are other healthy staples that could become new foods for comfort. Foods such as salmon, turkey, flax, walnuts, avocados, raisins, dark chocolate, cereal, green tea and yogurt are already common elements in many diets, and can naturally decrease stress and provide a boost to one’s mood, in addition to being a tasty and healthy option (Liao).



Source: Shutterstock

## Special Dietary Needs

Another area of interest within the comfort trend is that of special dietary needs. Comfort foods are not exempt from the products being reformulated to accommodate the needs of consumers with dietary restrictions such as wheat, gluten or dairy intolerances, as well as religious observances, such as kosher and halal.



Label claims on Camela’s Chunky Chocolate Chip Cookies include being all-natural, wheat-free, gluten-free, non-dairy and gourmet. This kosher certified product is also described as comfort food at its finest and is sold in a recyclable carton.

Source: Mintel GNPD

Some suggestions for more healthful cooking substitutions in comfort food preparation:

- ▶ **Mashed Potatoes**  
Add richness by adding chicken broth and reduced-fat sour cream in place of milk or heavy cream.
- ▶ **Shepherd’s Pie**  
Replace mashed-potato topping with frozen puréed squash; for portion control (and presentation), prepare in individually sized ramekins.
- ▶ **Chicken-Fried Steak and Gravy**  
Oven bake the meat instead of deep-frying, and reduce the amount of fat and sodium added.
- ▶ **Chicken and Dumplings**  
Substitute whole wheat flour for dumplings; use boneless, skinless chicken to reduce fat and calories, and reduced-sodium chicken broth.
- ▶ **Macaroni and Cheese**  
Replace whole milk with low-fat milk, refined white pasta with whole-wheat pasta, and some of the full-fat cheeses with low-fat cottage cheese, or extra sharp cheddar cheese, to reduce fat and calories without losing flavour.

Source: [www.eatingwell.com](http://www.eatingwell.com)





## ▶ CONCLUSION

The desire for comfort food is expected to evolve alongside the economic climate, and levels of consumer stress. As there are so many different factors that could trigger the need or desire to seek comfort through food, this trend will inevitably continue to change over time, to reflect the global availability of an increasing variety of food products as well as changes in consumer demographics. Updated, more gourmet, or healthier adaptations of familiar favourites will lead the way for new comfort foods appearing on consumers' tables. However, there are opportunities to expand the demand for comfort foods by combining nostalgia and tradition with modern flavours and preferences, particularly demands for novelty, convenience, and suitability for special dietary requirements.



Source: Shutterstock

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Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada  
1341 Baseline Road, Tower 5, 4th floor  
Ottawa, ON  
Canada K1A 0C5  
E-mail: [infoservice@agr.gc.ca](mailto:infoservice@agr.gc.ca)

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