

Comfort Foods Are Back!



The 1955 incarnation of Betty Crocker

I can almost taste the Sunday pot roast and creamy mashed potatoes now...mmmm. All the foods that Mom used to make are showing up on menus across the country.

In May 2002, the National Restaurant Association cited 'comfort food' as a warming trend. One year later, America has definitely warmed up to those foods that just make us feel good inside!

So what exactly are comfort foods? Well, they tend to differ slightly depending on who you might ask, but there is a definite agreement on fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes and the like. Comfort foods are those culinary delights that we turn to when we just want to feel better. Think of it as trying to recapture a part of your childhood when you felt all nice a cozy. Our senses – sight, smell, taste – transport us back to when we first remember eating that slice of pound cake and nothing else in the world matter.

The resurgence of comfort foods has been partially attributed to a post September 11th desire to get back to basics.¹ And the quest to simplify food doesn't stop at the menu. Dinner guests are seeking out restaurants where they can feel at home. This is quite evident in the successful resurrection of a Tallahassee landmark – Andrew's 228 – the former Andrew's 2nd Act.

Prior to it's re-opening, Andrew's 228 was a slightly more formal affair than it's modern day equivalent. Gone are stuffy menus and tableside prepared meals. In its place are updated versions of classical dishes and Mama's Cooking – a nightly special ranging from Chicken Pot Pie to Meatloaf to succulent Osso Bucco. Lunch specials featuring Mama's Cooking include rarely seen Hanger Steak with Hand-Cut Fries and Emma's Roasted Chicken.

228 MAMA'S COOKING

Limited availability, Priced right! Come early.

Don't ask Mama what's for dinner... your server has all the answers!

A primary component to much of the home-style flair to the menu is the addition of Whipped Potatoes. Simmered in their jackets, russet potatoes are then peeled and passed through the fine plate of a food mill. The fine, uniform potatoes are then returned to the heat to dry out before a mixture of butter and milk are added to produce a consistency suitable to be piped into a curl for the guest's plate. Rounding out the menu collection at Andrew's 228 is a collection of classic stand-by desserts such as Crème Brulee, Apple Brown Betty and White Chocolate Bread Pudding.

Across town, Mashed Potatoes are a part of another lively menu at Food Glorious Food. They alternate with their cousin, the sweet potato which appears in the form of delicate, deep fried strings. Also appearing in the form of crisp fried chips, the potato is a natural compliment to the appetizer assortment. In addition to a plethora of comfort salads, soups and entrees, FGF boasts the best dessert selection in town. Old-fashioned cobblers, marble cake and coconut pie are quite literally like Mom used to make them. No mass-production here. Susan Turner's Key Lime Pound Cake is still prepared one flavor-bursting cake at a time. And who can pass up delicious desserts like that?

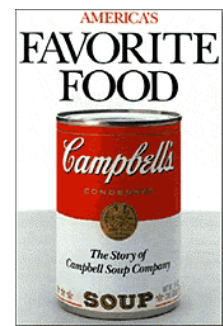
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So where has this recent surge in comfort food originated? Many speculate that after the September 11th terrorist attack that America was clamoring to return to the foods that could sooth and diminish the heart-wrenching images and unavoidable stress. The foods that provide a sense of security and memories of happier times have been come the not-so-uncommon luxury in recent months. The sobering experience of the attack has left people with a sense that life is too short and should be enjoyed.ⁱⁱ

The psychology of food plays a very important role in how we chose to meet our daily nutritional needs. Brian Wansink, a professor of marketing at the University of Illinois directs the school's food and brand laboratory as well as maintaining www.foodpsychology.com. In a published paper, co-authored by Cynthia Sangerman, *Engineering Comfort Foods* explains that we do not only seek these foods when we are sad, bored or lonely. We also crave them when we are happy and wanting to celebrate or reward ourselves – to the tune of 86% of the time as opposed to 39% when we are sad.

While the types of foods that we consider to be comforting vary from person to person, there are at least two factors that influence our choice in comfort – a past association with the food and personal identification with food.ⁱⁱⁱ

I can personally remember whenever I was ill my mother would open a can for me of the magic elixir - chicken noodle soup. Whenever I feel the season's cold coming, I reach for that magic can of soup. And it should be noted that not just any chicken noodle soup would do. It needs to be the condensed soup from the red and white-labeled can. Otherwise, it just wouldn't be the same. These feelings are shared by much of the public. Foods that can be associated with an event or with a person take on a special meaning.



It can also be said that many people define themselves by what they eat. A constant diet of organic and 'health' foods may be one person's comfort while another may want to feed a macho personality with nothing but 'meat and potatoes.'ⁱⁱⁱ Remember the saying, "Real men don't eat quiche"?

In as much as food defines who we are, it is one essential that we cannot live without. Happy or sad, nostalgic or bored, certain foods give us a hug from the inside. So the next time you cozy up with that favorite bowl of soup and a grilled cheese sandwich, just be happy!

ⁱ The National Restaurant Association, <http://www.restaurant.org/rusa/magArticle.cfm?ArticleID=768>

ⁱⁱ "Seeking comfort, diners indulge in feel-good fare", Bret Thorn, Nation's Restaurant News, Oct 15, 2001 http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m3190/42_35/79210911/p1/article.jhtml?term=

ⁱⁱⁱ *Engineering Comfort Foods*, Brian Wansink and Cynthia Sangerman, University of Illinois, <http://www.foodpsychology.com/content/engineeringcomfortfoods.pdf>

*Betty Crocker picture courtesy of http://www.cookbkj.com/college/betty_crocker.htm

**Campbells picture courtesy of <http://www.campbellsoupcompany.com/history.asp>

***Additional Reference: "Surprise! Sometimes comfort foods are good for you", Michele Dula Baum, CNN.com, September 21, 2000, <http://www.cnn.com/2000/FOOD/news/09/21/comfort.foods/>