

# Comfort foods with a healthy twist

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The fall season brings the bounty of the autumn harvest, the return of warm spice aromas, and the satisfaction of richly flavored comfort foods.

As the last leaves fall and winter rolls in, many people enjoy staying indoors, making a fire, and eating warm comfort foods. Macaroni and cheese, chicken pot pie, creamy soups, homemade stuffing, cinnamon rolls, cookies, apple pie...

Why do we crave comfort foods as the season turns to winter? The answer isn't so simple.

One of the main arguments in favor of our cold-weather eating habits is that it's simply instinct. We may have a genetic tendency to seek out more calorie-dense food in the winter months because food, historically, was scarcer. To an extent, we are programmed to latch onto food in order to build fat stores to provide us with heat and energy during the colder seasons.

Studies have investigated the idea that seasonal changes could affect hormones such

as leptin and ghrelin, which influence our appetite.

There is also considerable research showing seasonal affective disorder (SAD) — which affects one to three percent of the population — is linked to increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings, which are probably consumed in the form of comfort foods. This is likely due to changes in brain chemistry brought about by the change in seasons and alterations in circadian rhythm, the body's biological clock.

People may also be less active and less social in the winter, which could increase anxiety and depression and lead to stress-eating and overconsumption.

In addition, a study published in the journal *Appetite* found that there is a "social" component to foods that provide us solace: a food is comforting because of the memories they evoke, and the emotions and relationships that we associate with them. If your grandmother served you chocolate chip cookies as a child, that may be why you make a pit-stop at the bakery on your way home from the office after a stressful day.

While comfort foods may

be satisfying, we often end up stuffed and feeling a little guilty for overeating. The good news is there are lots of healthy substitutes that can still taste great.

At this busy time of year we need fuel — but without excess calories. You can eat your favorite comfort foods but stay healthy and feel good at the same time.

People would agree that nothing tastes better than a hot bowl of soup on a cold winter day. Soups and stews are a terrific idea in the winter, if they are not cream-based or loaded with high-fat meat.

It's that time of year when you might need lasagna on hand, or simple pasta recipes to whip up on a weekend with family visits. There are plenty of creative ways to incorporate the winter-white florets (cauliflower) into the season's most classic comfort foods. You can replace traditional mashed potatoes with mashed cauliflower or try tossing roasted florets with an array of spices for a healthy cauliflower snack.

If you crave potatoes, opt for sweet potatoes when you can to boost nutrition

## Spaghetti Squash Meatball Casserole

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| 1 medium spaghetti squash (about 4 pounds) | 1 garlic clove, minced                     |
| 1/2 tsp. salt, divided                     | 2 cups chopped collard greens              |
| 1/2 tsp. fennel seed                       | 1 cup chopped fresh spinach                |
| 1/4 tsp. ground coriander                  | 1 cup reduced-fat ricotta cheese           |
| 1/4 tsp. dried basil                       | 2 plum tomatoes, chopped                   |
| 1/4 tsp. dried oregano                     | 1 cup pasta sauce                          |
| 1 lb. ground beef, 90% lean                | 1 cup shredded part-skim mozzarella cheese |
| 2 tsps. olive oil                          |  |
| 1 medium onion, chopped                    |  |

Cut squash lengthwise in half; discard seeds. Place halves on a microwave-safe plate, cut side down.

Microwave, uncovered, on high until tender, 15-20 minutes. Cool slightly.

Preheat oven to 350° F. Mix 1/4 teaspoon salt with remaining seasonings; add to beef, mixing lightly but thoroughly. Shape into 1.5" balls.

In a large skillet, brown meatballs over medium heat; remove from pan.

In same pan, heat oil over medium heat; sauté onion until tender, 3 to 4 minutes.

Add garlic; cook and stir 1 minute. Stir in collard greens, spinach, ricotta cheese and remaining salt; remove from heat.

Using a fork, separate strands of spaghetti squash; stir into greens mixture.

Transfer to a greased 13"x9" baking dish. Top with tomatoes, meatballs, sauce and cheese.

Bake, uncovered, until meatballs are cooked through, 30-35 minutes.

and satisfy your craving for starchy carbohydrates. You can even top them with a little butter and brown sugar.

Baked apples with cinnamon are a delicious fall dessert that you can top with a

bit of yogurt or ice cream if you want to indulge.

A favorite comfort food dinner is spaghetti and meatballs. Why not replace the pasta with spaghetti squash; it's a healthier version!

*Serving the Sisters, Camp Sherman and Black Butte Ranch Areas*



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