

# Comfort Food

It's a matter of time and place.

**J**ust reciting the list of usual suspects — macaroni and cheese, chicken noodle soup, meat loaf — is strangely relaxing, as though in speaking the dishes aloud we invoke their comforting powers. But here's a tip, in case you didn't already know: Any food can be comfort food at the right place and time.

The season has something to do with it, for sure. I remember one day last summer, after a hot morning hike in shoes that didn't breathe and socks that collected burs like a stray dog's coat, I sat down to a chunk of watermelon from the fridge. It was an inspired choice, seedless, succulent, and soothing in much the same way as a good chicken soup is on a bad winter's day. They both equalize body temperature, which in extreme weather conditions is a very comforting thing.

But comfort food goes beyond physical needs, into issues of class and culture. Our choices for soothing suppers reveal everything about us. We take with us our culture's choices — miso soup in Japan, in Germany maybe potato pancakes — and overlay them with family favorites. The qualities may be identifiable and similar from culture to culture — smooth, creamy, hot, savory — but the mix is unique. On an individual level, our choice of comfort food is as changeable as our moods.

True comfort food, whatever its form, meets all the desires and needs we bring to the table at any given moment. After a particularly challenging day at work, I might crave the relief and sheer adolescent self-indulgence implicit in, say, a big glass of tomato juice and a bowl of cheddar-sour cream potato chips (a snack from my teenhood, associated with trashy books and a warm summer's day). Another time, on a long-overdue date with my sweetie, I may be drawn to a melting filet mignon, a smooth velvety morsel that gives me an excuse to shyly offer a bite across the table. This is what psychologists and Oprah call emotional eating, and there's nothing wrong with it. On the contrary, these comfort foods represent the body's basic need to soothe itself.

Now, as stressful as life can be, I don't always need comfort food. But I am always on the lookout, and every once in a while I'll stumble across a new food with real comfort potential. A few years ago, I started a new job 100 miles from home, which necessitated occasional overnight stays at an acquaintance's house. My friend didn't say anything about food, so when I stumbled back after the first day — tired, frustrated, and hungry — I anticipated only a strange bed and an empty stomach.

Instead, my hostess met me at the front door, ushered me into the kitchen, and sliced up a baguette, crusty with sesame and poppy seeds. I sat there on a barstool, blinking like an

owl, while she rattled stacks of Tupperware out of the refrigerator and onto the counter. One container held some trout that her husband had caught and smoked himself. Did I want to try some? Another container contained a velvety rind of Cambozola; I'd never heard of it, but sure.

I timidly sliced off a piece of the soft, fragrant blue cheese, spread it on the bread, and took a bite. All in a rush, my appetite for life came back and settled happily along the sides of my tongue. I wanted to faint, it was so good. The sesame seeds from the bread burst against my teeth. The cheese melted in a flood of saliva. The trout flaked delicately in my fingers. I had never eaten these foods before, but tasting them, I recognized them immediately as symbols of care and concern. They were as comforting as mother's milk, too comforting for words, or even to say thank you. Until now.

## Mac and Cheese

Macaroni and cheese is the Prozac of the food world, at least for me. This version, slightly adapted from the one in Rose Eliot's *The Complete Vegetarian Cuisine*, won over my tastebuds with the tang it gets from Dijon mustard. Make sure to use a shallow pan, whether you are using a broiler or not: it increases the surface area that will get all melty and crusty and good.

butter for greasing  
1/2 pound macaroni, penne,  
or small shells  
4 tbsp. butter  
2 rounded tbsp. white flour  
2 1/2 cups milk  
2 tsp. Dijon mustard  
2 cups grated Cheddar cheese  
salt and black pepper to taste  
1 1/3 cups plain bread crumbs

Heat broiler, or preheat oven to 400 degrees. Grease pan and set aside. Cook macaroni in boiling water until *al dente*, drain well and set aside. Meanwhile, make the sauce. Start by melting butter in a saucepan, adding flour, and stirring for 1-2 minutes over medium heat. Add milk a quarter-cup at a time, stirring well and allowing sauce to thicken between each addition. Let sauce simmer over medium-low heat for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, then remove from heat and add mustard, two-thirds of grated cheese, and salt and pepper. Mix together cooked macaroni and cheese sauce. Check seasoning, then spoon mixture into baking pan and level surface. Sprinkle bread crumbs and remaining cheese over top. Broil for 5 to 10 minutes, or heat through in oven for about 20 minutes, until macaroni and cheese is hot inside and golden-brown and crisp on top. **EW**

*Marina Wolf lives in San Francisco and teaches dancing to "people of all sizes."*



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