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# COMFORT FOODS

Mixture of ethnic cultures influences variety of products that evoke a sense of home for diners who are on the go

By Dave Wolkowitz

**T**o some extent, eating anything makes people feel comfortable. So what exactly is a comfort food, anyway?

The answer, according to on-site operators, is in flux as the country's demographics continue to evolve. Nowadays mashed potatoes, tortillas and sticky rice are equally beloved in the hearts of on-site consumers looking for a sense of home and familiarity in their meals.

ribs or carved turkey, people are just lining up," Milius says. "Why is it so popular? The presentation of the food. It invokes the Sunday dinner, the food they had at home. Comfort food is seen as less complicated. Here it comes right out from the oven, right in front of their faces."

Though predictability is inherent in the concept of comfort foods, variety is an important element in keeping diners interested. At MBNA employees dine in

migrated to mainstream, comfort food status in the United States.

Judy Edner, the director of university dining services at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says patience is a virtue when one is introducing a new comfort food.

"People want to know what to expect," she says. "It can take a while for something to catch on. It is important to retain a certain sense of consistency. When we try to implement new comfort foods, we have to be willing to go with a slower startup."

Edner points to the demographics of the UC, Santa Barbara, campus to demonstrate the influence of ethnic foods.

"Even though less than 5 percent of our student body is Latino, traditional Latino foods are very popular because students now are used to eating them at home and in restaurants," she says. "The same is true with Asian foods. Foods like beans and tortillas and sticky rice have become staples of many students' diets."

Some ethnic foods have helped usher in an increasing desire for customization of comfort foods, operators note. When diners can impact the ingredients used to cook their food or add different flavorings, the familiarity of comfort foods remains as variety of tastes increases.

Milius says several concepts at UNI incorporate customization. "We have a Mongolian grill where people can collect their ingredients, and we add their choice of sauce and meat," she says. "We also have a wok station where they can do the same thing. Each time we renovate, we add a concept that has an aspect of customization to it."

Edner says customization is a hit on her campus and isn't restricted to traditional dinner-time comfort foods. Omelet stations that allow students to pick their own omelet ingredients are a big hit.

Andrea Gauthier, Sodexo's director of food and beverage at the San Ramon Valley Conference Center in San Ramon, Calif., points out that comfort foods aren't only entrées. She considers vegetables to be a critical part of her comfort food offerings. Her operation serves employees of a utility company who are a totally captive audience — they can't

eat anywhere else during their company training.

She says: "We do a lot of seasonal vegetables. We recently began working very closely with a local produce company. We started doing that within the last month, because that's what people are asking for. We get what's local, what's fresh. There is a definite difference when produce is fresh. It doesn't taste like it has been sitting in a warehouse for a long time."

Since comfort foods are somewhat anti-trend by definition, maintaining variety while introducing change can be challenging, and so market research is key.

Benson says MBNA conducts external benchmarking, conducts interviews with employees, and tries new products and recipes offered by foodservice distributors. Northern Iowa's Milius conducts similar activities, along with using secret shoppers to circulate among students to garner unfiltered opinions. She also studies nationwide surveys of college students. Gauthier says diners at her facility at the San Ramon Valley Conference Center are given a quality-of-service evaluation to help her staff keep on top of trends. Edner of UC, Santa Barbara, advises foodservice operations to use employees as intelligence gatherers to capitalize on their close contact with customers.

"We just did a focus group about late-night options for students," Edner explains. "One thing I heard loud and clear is that they want healthful options. That's not to say they always eat healthfully, but they at least want the option to. A great example is turkey. Turkey is the new beef — it's so popular. Our students believe turkey is more healthful than beef, and it outsells beef 10 to one."

While it is crucial to be cognizant of changes in comfort foods, MBNA's Benson says foodservice operators also should be able to spot a trend on the decline.

"The whole low-carb thing is getting overused," he says. "It's true that people are looking for a comfort food that is not going to bog them down with carbs, but we have to be creative in how we bundle our meat. The starch options are there, and more people take it than not. The low-carb craze has peaked."



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Russ Benson, a regional manager of dining and hospitality services with MBNA America Bank, N.A. in Wilmington, Del., says comfort foods are "simple food people feel comfortable ordering, with big portions and good value. People want to know the ingredients. It should make them feel full when they're done eating."

He continues: "We serve old-fashioned mashed potatoes, pot roast and oven-roasted potatoes. We clearly see that consumers are driven toward those foods. Even though we try to keep the food simple, we hear time and time again, 'Why is the food so fancy?'"

Mona Milius, the associate director of residence dining at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa, says nostalgia and fond memories contribute to the popularity of comfort foods.

"When we have barbecued

house two to four times per week. Benson says he views major chain restaurants as his competition and believes he must compete on their level to entice employees to eat at company facilities.

"It is important to rotate comfort foods," Benson says. "If I put chicken parmigiana out every day, sales drop because novelty has worn out."

Milius modifies comfort foods to keep her diners interested. "We put extra twists on comfort foods. Maybe garlic or wasabi in mashed potatoes," she says. "People look for different flavorings."

The meaning of comfort foods is changing. While the term "comfort food" traditionally meant foods such as meat loaf or roasted turkey with potatoes, now many Mexican and Asian dishes that once were considered residents of the ethnic realm have