



CONSUMER COMFORT: Comfort & Indulgence Inspired Flavors

Whether it's a cup of chicken soup that brings you back to your grandmother's table or an end-of-the-day sweet reward after a long day in a still-uncertain time, there's comfort to be taken in everyday foods and drinks. Consumers are clamoring for comforting flavors and permissible indulgences that don't just taste good but also make them feel good. With plenty of opportunity in this food and beverage space, let's take a look at the resurgence of classic comforting flavors and new twists on favorites that combine yesterday, today and tomorrow.

THE COMFORT ZONE

Winter has always seen a spike in comfort foods, due to bone-chilling weather, cabin fever and general post-holiday, pre-spring doldrums. In challenging times, pandemic-weary consumers are flocking to favorite, familiar and flavorful foods even more. It's part solace, part entertainment and part reward for enduring ongoing restrictions and concerns. Going forward, expect an ongoing clamor for tradition, with just enough novelty to make it interesting.

1 IN 4 EAT MORE COMFORT FOODS

82% of consumers say the pandemic has changed what they eat and how they purchase food, with **1 in 4** eating more comfort foods.

SNACK FOOD CONSUMPTION RISING

Snack food consumption has risen **8%** during the pandemic with consumers consoling themselves with savory and sweet snacks.

COMFORT IS THE #1 DRIVER OF SNACKING

53% consumers report that they are buying nostalgic brands from childhood; **59%** say that they want snacks that bring back good memories - The State of Snacking 2020



“Driving the strong performance of comfort foods and baking products during the pandemic, food shoppers say that familiarity has become more important. While this mindset might represent a challenge for new product innovation, the biggest opportunities may lie in launches that offer a fresh twist on something familiar.”

-MINTEL



IMPLICATIONS FOR FLAVOR:

New research published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* indicates that these trying times are leading to an interest in comforting flavors. According to the researchers' findings, cognitive depletion might increase the enjoyment of simple-flavored foods.

WHAT IS COMFORT FOOD, EXACTLY?



Of course, comfort food is all about feeling good, or at least better, after eating or drinking something. But delving into the science of what makes certain foods comforting provides insights on how to offer products that satisfy people's palates as well as their intrinsic needs.

From a biological standpoint, the experience of eating enjoyable foods releases dopamine in the human brain. In times of stress, the human body also produces more cortisol, a stress hormone that stimulates the reward-seeking area of the brain.

Psychologically, the emotional reward of eating and drinking goes all the way back to infancy and the link between feeding and feeling soothed. Research has confirmed that people prefer the taste of comfort food when feeling isolated or threatened, which could be an explanation as to why consumers' have had increased interest in comfort food during hard times throughout the pandemic.

In adulthood, the association between food and feelings continues and is typically tied with good memories, such as a hot dog that reminds you of a day at the ballpark or blueberry pancakes like the ones you ate on weekend mornings. It isn't as much about sweet versus salty or indulgent versus healthy as it is about how it makes you feel and react.

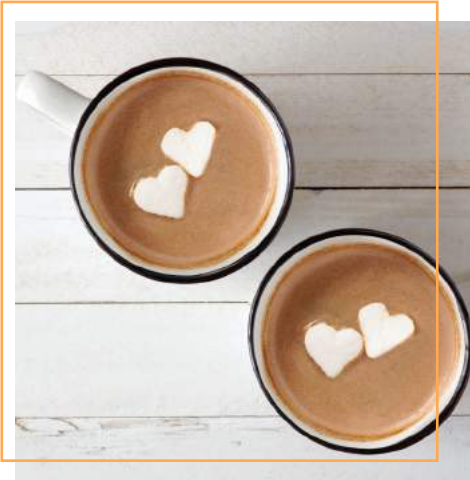
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“The real power of comfort food may lie in its ability to connect us with people through memories of past social experiences, such as birthdays and holidays...Instead of the food itself making us feel better, it seems that comfort foods serve as a tangible connection to our happiest memories, and that these memories are what make us feel good.”

-PRAGMATIC BRAIN SCIENCE INSTITUTE

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TASTY THROWBACKS



Given the stress and anxiety of recent months, it's no wonder that familiar foods with nostalgic flavors are faring well. Even as people report that they are trying to eat healthier, they often fall back on tastes that evoke good times, with flavors like birthday

cake, butterscotch and marshmallows on the sweet side and popcorn, cheese and pickles on the savory side.

Consumers are also revisiting regional flavors of their past, especially if they have moved away from their native area. In addition, many are embracing heritage cooking, whether traditional meals are prepared by a family member or a restaurant chef who uses similar flavors and techniques.

- **71%** of consumers say they enjoy eating things that remind them of their childhood.
- **85%** of consumers report that eating their favorite snacks makes them feel "normal" and almost half say it makes them feel happy.

PRODUCTS OF NOTE



SUN-MAID BITES S'MORES FLAVORED FRUIT, OAT & NUT BITES are made with whole fruit, contain only 5g added sugar per serving, whole grains and nuts, and have no synthetic colors or artificial flavors. Other flavors in this line include Birthday Cake, Banana Split and PB&J.

40% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.



JENI'S SWEET CREAM BISCUITS & PEACH JAM ICE CREAM features buttermilk ice cream, crumbled biscuits, and swirls of jam made with Georgia peaches from The Peach Truck.

28% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.



SWISS MISS LUCKY CHARMS HOT COCOA MIX WITH LUCKY CHARMS MARSHMALLOWS is a hot cocoa mix made with premium imported cocoa and the popular Lucky Charms Marshmallows from the iconic cereal.

53% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.



KELLOGG'S COTTON CANDY UNICORN WAFFLES are naturally and artificially flavored and sold in a 11.6-oz. recyclable pack containing six waffles.

45% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.

IN FOR A TREAT

In addition to dishes that evoke certain sentiments, many food and beverages are savored as a simple reward, for getting through a long work or school day or continuing to face challenges related to the global health crisis. Here, too, a sense of satisfaction is delivered through indulgent flavor.

JUST DESSERTS: From apple pie to cheesecake, dessert flavors provide the reward factor across a variety of formats, including basic baked goods and as an ingredient in other dessert foods and beverages.

CHIP OFF THE BLOCK: Barbeque to sour cream and onion, chips are a go-to snack, for stress eating and for pure enjoyment. In fact, sales of tortilla and tostada chips have risen at a higher rate than the overall salty snack category. As plant-based products have taken off, crave-worthy chips come in all kinds of veggie varieties, opening the door to new products with different bases, flavors and seasonings.

AGED TO PERFECTION: Interest in comforting rich and savory flavors found in charcuterie meats and cheeses, along with wine pairings, is expected to continue through the still-challenging parts of 2021.

PRODUCTS OF NOTE



APPLEGATE NATURALS CHARCUTERIE PLATE UNCURED CHORIZO SALAMI & MEDIUM CHEDDAR CHEESE WITH MILK CHOCOLATE COVERED GRAIN-FREE PRETZELS includes salami made of 100% natural humanely raised and minimally processed meat and is free from artificial ingredients..

24% responded that they would likely or definitely buy this product.



THE CHEESECAKE FACTORY AT HOME CAKE BATTER STRAWBERRY ROYALE is a decadent, cool and creamy dessert with a cake batter pudding and a sweet strawberry puree.



M&M'S FUDGE BROWNIE CHOCOLATE CANDIES were repackaged in December 2020 and are available in a 9.50-oz. pack featuring a recipe suggestion.

UPDATED CLASSICS

Culinary trends continue to capture consumer interest. Consumers are enjoying exploring new flavors and flavor experiences and, if they are not going all out on novel foods, they are mixing up familiar fare with different, unexpected or bold ingredients when they choose to indulge. Think of it like the recent trends of unusual mac-and-cheese combinations, seasoned ketchup or the rise of the boozy milkshake.

Good news: the possibilities are, if not endless, expansive. Traditional and even nostalgic dessert flavors can be paired with spicier flavors, like a dark chocolate cayenne brownie. A plant-based chicken alternative can take the place of poultry in a soup.



“COVID-19 has a massive impact on trend predictions heading into 2021, as consumers cook and eat at home more, turning to everyday meals and special treats to comfort and support their mental and physical well-being. We’re seeing several trends around experimenting with flavors and ingredients, as well as turning to functional or plant-based foods and twists on classic products to avoid menu fatigue.”

-SPECIALTY FOOD ASSOCIATION



PRODUCTS OF NOTE



GARDEIN PLANT-BASED CHICK'N NOODLE SOUP is a microwavable product made with chunks of plant-based chick'n, tender vegan noodl's and vegetables. It is free from GMOs, eggs, dairy, artificial preservatives and flavors.

34% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.



BROOKLYN DELHI CURRY KETCHUP is described as a delicious twist on classic ketchup with roasted garlic, Indian spices and chili peppers for just the right amount of heat. It can be paired with brats, burgers, French fries, grilled cheese and eggs.

32% responded that they likely or definitely would buy this product.



PEPSI ANNOUNCED A LIMITED-EDITION COCOA COLA in late 2020, said to combine the delicious taste of Pepsi with the delicious, wintry taste of chocolate and marshmallow.

2021 TREND PROJECTIONS

- In its projections for 2021, Technomic highlighted “New-mami” flavor exploration, in which consumers seek comforting foods with umami applications like nontraditional fruit vinegars, tomato jam and different kinds of mushrooms.
- Innova Market Insights pegs “modern nostalgia” as a trend for 2021, with the addition of exotic ingredients to familiar products and a reimagining of flavors.

EXPERIENCE AND EXPLORATION

As with updated classics, there is potential to amplify comfort food with elements of experiential cuisine. The element of fun is big here, as consumers enjoy the multisensory aspects of what they are eating and drinking. What will be the next hot chocolate bomb or edible glitter? Social media platforms like TikTok helped launch some of the recent trends, such as whipped coffee and mini pancakes, and are a good place to monitor for emerging at-home eatertainment ideas.



PRODUCTS OF NOTE



MODERN GOURMET FOODS CAST IRON SKILLET BAKING KIT with Chocolate Pizza includes pizza dough baking mix with chocolate chips, marshmallows and Toblerone Swiss chocolate. The product retails in a 103g pack bearing cooking instructions.



SUGARSIN FIZZY PROSECCO GUMMIES are gummies infused with real sparkling prosecco sprinkled with fizzy sugar crystals, with natural and artificial raspberry and pineapple flavors. The alcohol-free product retails in a 3.52-oz. pack.

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“These are serious times and with some areas still experiencing closures in theaters, stadiums, concert halls, and other entertainment venues, we are looking to have fun at home.”

-SPECIALTY FOOD ASSOCIATION

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THE TAKEAWAYS

Consumers today are seeking solace in the form of comfort foods that provide a sense of normalcy or serve as a reward during high-stress times. Manufacturers can deliver on tastes and demands with familiar, nostalgic and simple flavors that evoke positive memories and fun experiences. In addition to throwbacks, look forward by offering inventive updates on traditional favorites, with hints of intriguing flavors added to classic formulations and formats. For now, comforting flavors get the big embrace in the food and beverage space.

YOU DESERVE MORE. LET'S GET STARTED.

What does true partnership look like? You deserve a flavor partner ready to turn these trends into the tangible.

Let FONA's market insight and research experts get to work for you. Translate these trends into bold new ideas for your brand. Increase market share and get to your "what's next." Our technical flavor and product development experts are also at your service to help meet the labeling and flavor profile needs for your products to capitalize on this consumer trend. Let's mesh the complexities of flavor with your brand development, technical requirements and regulatory needs to deliver a complete taste solution.

From concept to manufacturing, we're here for you — every step of the way. Contact our sales service department at [630.578.8600](tel:630.578.8600) to request a flavor sample or [chat us up at www.fona.com/contact-fona/](http://www.fona.com/contact-fona/)

SOURCES

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- FoodDive
- Forbes
- Harris Poll/Mondelez
- The Hartman Group
- Innova Market Insights
- International Food Information Council (IFIC)
- Institute of Food Technologists (IFT)
- IRI
- Journal of Consumer Psychology
- Karl Finn for Medium
- Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants
- Mintel
- Nielsen
- Specialty Food Association

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