

How the Pandemic Redefined Comfort Food: American Individualism, Culinary Relativism, and Shifting Moralities

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Early in the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States in 2020, American popular media began promoting dishes and meals described as comfort food as a way to deal with the anxieties, difficulties, and inconveniences caused by the pandemic. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1997 as “food that comforts or affords solace,” comfort food seems like a logical thing for people to turn to in a time of crisis (Locher). Observations of news media and social media as well as ethnographic research suggest that the idea resonated with the American public (Cresswell; Long “Finding Comfort;” Laskey).

The concept, however, is more complicated than simply food that brings comfort. Its original vernacular use in the 1950s and 60s reflects a U.S. American morality around food that ties the consumption of foods considered “unhealthy” or “fattening” to a lack of character, self-discipline, or self-esteem (Jones and Long). Feelings of loneliness, hurt, or depression could be assuaged by such foods, so experiencing those feelings became justification for consuming “comfort foods” without moral indictment (Counihan “Food Rules;” Locher; Ong et al.; Romm; Wagner et al.). At least that is what individuals could tell themselves and others, so that comfort food emerged as a rhetorical strategy for eating these foods without guilt or shame. The phrase was adopted by academics

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studying nutrition and health issues, and the food industry coopted it as a marketing category for certain foods laden with sugars, fats, oils, carbohydrates, and generally considered less than nutritious but tasty. These foods were oftentimes presented as snack foods or as “down home” all-American cooking (Long “Comfort Food in Culinary Tourism”). Products advertised as “comfort foods” are now mass-produced and commercially available throughout the United States, and marketing even identifies some restaurants as belonging to that genre of food (Jones and Long; Wagner et al.).

As the pandemic raged through 2021, comfort food continued to hold a prominent place in popular media as well as in the food industry. I propose, though, that the general public has unintentionally redefined the concept, and that this redefinition challenges the assumptions underlying comfort food as a genre within U.S. American food culture that reflects a shift in the morality attached to food and eating. The genre has been expanded to that of “foods that comfort” without judgment of the eater’s moral character, and mass media has played a central role in this process.

I explore that shift in this paper, arguing that its implications go beyond simply an expansion of which items are considered within the category. This new conceptualization incorporates both the fundamental U.S. American ideal of individualism and the reality of diversity within the nation, merging those ideas into a widespread culinary relativism that accepts the validity of all tastes and personal experiences. In doing so, it challenges the authority of the food industry to define the meanings food holds for us and represents an on-going re-negotiation of who gets to say what constitutes good food.

The Concept of Comfort Food

Food has long been seen in the US as representing the moral character of the individuals consuming it. Historian Jennifer Wallach traces attitudes to multiple sources for this perspective but sees the Puritans as primarily responsible for this belief system: “The custom of eating simply was fundamental to many Puritans’ sense of who they were...Their most important source of sustenance...was spiritual and not temporal” (27). This translated into “simple dishes” valued for their practical functions and a suspicion of anyone who found sensual pleasure in food.

Such attitudes laid a foundation for a U.S. American food ethos that has carried over into contemporary mainstream society. For example, anthropologist Carole Counihan identified a system of morality at play among college students in the 1980s that evaluated different foods as “good” or “bad” according to the nutritional content and function of those items. Obesity was then interpreted as the result of consuming bad foods, and a reflection of the individual’s character:

Because food means comfort and love for students, splurging on sweets or other special foods is sanctioned as a crutch for dealing with emotional distress: grief, depression, anger. Students know eating certain foods makes them feel better; so they allow the emotionally therapeutic value of the food to override the possible nutritional drawbacks of eating too much or eating the wrong things. (59)

That these values have become normalized is evident in how common it is to speak offhandedly of being “bad” by consuming foods considered unnecessary for our physical nourishment. Counihan also pointed out that this system is gendered: “morality demands self-control for women but allows indulgence to men” (4), and scholarship of foodway cultures associated with non-mainstream identities suggests different world views and moralities. One of my observations is that these other voices are becoming heard during the pandemic.

Emergence of the Concept of Comfort Food

The phrase “comfort food” seems to have first been used in print in a 1966 newspaper column by psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers who claimed it was being used by patients to explain their weight issues. Food writers in the popular media popularized it further. In 1977, a food critic for the *Washington Post* described an iconic dish (shrimp and grits) and its entire regional cuisine (the South) as comfort food, implying that it tasted good but was unhealthy (Richman). Later, in 2013, she corroborated the idea that the concept of comfort food existed within the general public, and she and others had simply named it (Richman).

The name was then picked up by the food industry, which used it for marketing, framing comfort foods as a specific genre to be judged according to how well they comforted rather than by their nutritional value. The result was that “bad” ingredients, such as large amounts of fats, sugars, salt, and carbohydrates, were expected in these foods and not taken into account in assessments of them. Comfort food is now an established genre in the US for cookbooks, recipes,

restaurants, and retailers, and the concept serves as a rhetorical strategy by which eaters justify – to themselves as well as to others – the consumption of “bad” foods. It is also now being used globally for some international foods to carry the characteristics of the genre. Whether it also carries the attached morality is unclear but would not be unsurprising given the spread of U.S. American cultural forms and mores.

Scholarship on Comfort Food

While the food industry and food media seemed to be aware of comfort food by the 1980s and 90s, it has received little attention from scholars. In the early 2000s, professionals in health and nutrition fields began looking at it to understand “unhealthy” eating, and medical sociologist, Julie Locher, developed a widely used definition: “Comfort food may be best thought of as any food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress, that evokes positive emotions and is associated with significant social relationships” (442). Locher and her colleagues went on to identify patterns in the use of comfort foods. They oftentimes were dishes familiar to the eater, consumed when the individual was “feeling down” and was alone. They provided comfort by fulfilling four emotional needs: nostalgia, convenience, physical comfort, and indulgence (279). Continued research identified an additional need – that of belonging (Troisi and Gabriel). Consuming foods that reminded one of social connections could then comfort, as could eating with other people. Other researchers questioned whether consuming these foods actually could bring any significant benefits, particularly when their consumption actually brought further discomfort or feelings of shame.¹

Social science scholarship on comfort food was concerned primarily with finding solutions to “poor” eating behaviors, and few scholars approached it as a cultural phenomenon. A recent volume explored it as a social construction, offering ethnographic accounts of its symbolic meanings and material uses in a range of food cultures in the U.S. and internationally (Jones and Long). This scholarship on comfort food seems not to have trickled down into popular culture. Media stories about comfort food during the pandemic only rarely referenced it. This lack suggests that the concept continues to be an emic genre rather than an

¹ Nutritionists developed a similar concept, “emotional eating,” but the term does not acknowledge the underlying morality and ensuing guilt associated with comfort food.

analytical one imposed by scholars or health professionals. Also, these appearances of the genre initially perpetuated the morality attached to the genre, but some stories and social media posts challenged those judgments. Some official media similarly followed suit, allowing for what seemed to become a dialogic conversation about the nature of this genre.

Comfort Food in Media and Social Media: Fulfilling Needs. Comfort food began showing up in news media and social media soon after the pandemic was officially announced in the United States in early March of 2020. These posts mentioned all five of the needs identified by scholars (convenience, nostalgia, indulgence, physical comfort, belonging) but also suggested others, such as distraction or escape. The needs are not exclusive and oftentimes overlap. The phrase “comfort food” was frequently used but, in some instances, was implied through phrases such as “stress-eating,” “comforting foods,” and “dishes that give comfort.” The general pattern was to point to the existence of specific needs as justification for consuming these foods, which in turn affirms the existence of a morality attached to the genre.

Fulfilling the Need for Convenience. One of the first stories in an official news outlet to recognize the prevalence of comfort food during the pandemic was on April 7, 2020, titled “‘I Just Need the Comfort’: Processed Foods Make a Pandemic Comeback” (Cresswell). The author described how sales for numerous companies had skyrocketed along with the pandemic and explained this trend due to “a combination of fear and practicality.” People wanted foods with long shelf lives in case of shortages, lock-downs, or difficulties around shopping. They also wanted foods that could be prepared quickly and easily, perhaps even by children, since families were suddenly at home all day, but work and school continued. She also points out less practical reasons: “For others, the food purchases are purely an emotional reaction. Consumers are reaching for foods that trigger a comforting childhood memory or are simply their go-to snack when they need to relieve stress.”

The 508 comments left on the *NYT*’s website suggest that this recognition of the turn to convenience foods for comfort struck a chord, both positively and negatively. Some readers appreciated the affirmation of their own choices, but others worried that this behavior would have a negative impact on body weight or health, perpetuating the implicit assumption that foods eaten for comfort rather than for nutritional or biological needs were unhealthy. As one reader pleaded: “Please, people, you will only hurt yourself by eating these foods with very little

nutrition, minerals and vitamins and loaded with preservatives and God Knows what other chemicals!” (April 8, 2020, Ellijay, GA)

Other readers had a sense of humor about their own “lapses.” One commenter wrote, “When I realized I could only order one package of Oreo Double Stuffs, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry” (April 8, 2020, Susan A., Ventura, CA). And another stated, “Doritos and I have reunited. It’s a toxic relationship. This week I have put more pounds on my body than miles on my car” (April 7, 2020, Carolina, Indianapolis, IN).

The article focused on “convenience foods” for comfort (Locher; Locher, et al). Not all of these are “unhealthy” in terms of nutritional content, but the category reflects the history of the industrial food system in the United States and the ways in which it has inserted highly processed foods dependent on modern technology into our daily eating habits. Numerous scholars, health professionals, and activists warn of the harms of these foods, but the pandemic justified consuming them anyway.

Fulfilling the Need for Nostalgia. The April 2020 article brought up another need – nostalgia – reflecting the reality that many U.S. Americans grew up with processed foods rather than the idealized homemade foods of stay-at-home mothers and grandmothers. One reader’s comment confirms that point and even suggests that these highly processed products represent “civilization,” a concept they find comforting: “What really sees us through is salt, fat, sugar and carbs. They sustain, energize and inspire us. As long as they are available we know we are tethered to civilization and the familiar. For me, Chef Boyardee Ravioli has been by my side from childhood days...to my 70th birthday next week and beyond” (April 8, 2020, Reuven, Long Island, NY). Other media stories similarly emphasized the nostalgic aspect of comfort food but continue the theme of these foods being unhealthy. One offers “updated” versions, claiming, “Comfort is more than just the flavors. It’s the memories.” It then suggests that the original recipes be saved for holidays, although readers should still limit the amounts they eat: “Sometimes, comfort is handled in the first bite...You don’t really need to eat the entire tray to remember how you felt when your mom served it to you” (*Southern Living*, May 24, 2021).

Fulfilling the Need for Indulgence. A third need identified by Locher – indulgence – is addressed in numerous articles and postings. As more than one social media poster pointed out, the pandemic has forced us to confront our mortality. One response to that knowledge is to indulge while we can. An April

2021 article, for example, states bluntly, “Sometimes, you just want to indulge in a classic comfort food dish, and we’re here to let you know there is nothing wrong with that” (Madonado). The author then offers “100+ Best-Ever Comfort Food Recipes” that “you can easily whip up in your kitchen....and they’re good for you, too.” Most of the dishes are usually heavy on carbohydrates, butter or other fats, dairy, salt, and sugar, but these alternative “healthier” recipes encourage readers to “indulge” without concern for their potential physical impact.

Fulfilling the Need for Physical Comfort. Physical comfort was the fourth need identified by Locher who observed that comfort food dishes are oftentimes associated with chilly weather that would encourage people to seek warmth and stay inside. The fact that the pandemic hit the United States in the winter months meant that, for many U.S. Americans, cold weather was also an excuse to seek comfort foods. An example in 2020, “A January Menu That Comforts and Restores,” states, “We’re all craving comfort, especially this winter, and nothing soothes like a warm bowl of soup, whether as a starter or as a meal” (Tanis).

The cold weather also meant that many U.S. Americans wanted to spend hours in the kitchen, letting the warmth of the oven and aromas of dishes baking fill the house. This partly motivated the surge in baking in the United States early in the pandemic that then resulted in shortages of flour and yeast.² An article titled, “Stress Baking More Than Usual? Confined to their homes, U.S. Americans are kneading dough,” points to physical comfort but also the need to get our minds off of the pandemic: “But for those who can still get the ingredients, baking provides a combination of distraction, comfort and especially with bread recipes, which can take days to complete – something to look forward to” (Marvar). Numerous publications offered recipes and instructions for joining the baking trend, expanding it beyond bread to include cakes, cookies: “What’s more comforting than stirring together a bowl of brown, beige and white ingredients, sliding it into the oven and watching as it transforms into something golden and spectacular?” (Laskey).

A later article refers not to the weather but to the current political state of affairs along with the pandemic, “Between pandemic fears and election stress, there are many reasons to crave comfort food, the edible equivalent of a weighted blanket. These 82 dishes won’t cure anything, but they might give you a little peace of mind” (*New York Times*, Nov. 2, 2021). The physical comforts offered

² The author explores the phenomenon in another article (Long and Vaughan, 2022).

by these foods can then translate into less tangible comforts.

Fulfilling the Need for Belonging. Belonging was identified by later researchers as an additional need fulfilled by comfort food (Troisi). The shutdowns due to the pandemic, as well as the recommended precautions, meant that many individuals were physically isolated. Even though virtual socializing emerged as an alternative, the pandemic was a time of loneliness for large portions of U.S. American society. Interestingly, media did not emphasize this loneliness as a potential justification for comfort food. Instead, it featured the idea of the activities around food as offering a sense of connection that could fulfill the need for belonging. One article stated:

Almost overnight, Americans have had to rethink one of the most elemental parts of their daily lives: food...eating is a cultural ritual that is also a necessity. Mealtimes arrive three times a day. How do you feed yourself and your family when restaurants are shuttered and store shelves emptying? And how do you take care of a community in crisis when caregiving meals...are off limits? (Severson and Moskin)

Similarly, a chef, Massimo Bottura, describes how he started a show, *Kitchen Quarantine*, with his family that offered a sense of belonging to himself and others. He stated, “Despite the loneliness and being isolated in our homes, we can connect and talk to people all over the world....This is something very special.”

Media stories and comments referencing the need to belong or its corollary, the need to assuage loneliness, frequently bypassed the morality implicitly attached to comfort food. Whereas some of the earlier scholarship on the subject pointed out that consuming these foods actually made people less likely to be sociable or to be invited into social relationships (Troisi), the pandemic forced an isolation that was imposed and not due to any personal failings of individuals. This external factor perhaps relieved people of the guilt they might otherwise have felt for not having social networks.³

Challenging the Morality Attached to Comfort Food

Most of these food media articles and responses echo the morality implicit in the genre of “comfort food,” presenting it as “bad.” They emphasized that the

³ This lack of guilt is perhaps due to the liminal quality of the pandemic in which the rules for healthy eating seem to be suspended (Shen, et al, 2020). This also helps explain the turn to comfort food since the genre itself can reflect liminality (Long 2017).

ingredients and dishes within that genre tend to be full of carbs, salt, sugar, or other qualities believed to be detrimental to eaters' health. Some of the articles suggest alternative ingredients or cooking styles felt to be healthier, while others point out that the pandemic justifies consuming comfort dishes in their classic renditions.

Comments from readers, postings on social media, and even some of the official media articles oftentimes chimed in with accounts of similar experiences and feelings, offering recipes and practical advice. Some comments, however, as well as media stories, began challenging the morality attached to comfort foods, doing so by referencing two fundamental characteristics of American society: individualism and diversity. Although these seem contradictory, they incorporate both the ideals and the realities of being U.S. American. They also reflect other current food trends expanding the American palate, namely, that of culinary relativism.

Individualism in American Culture. One of the themes in comments on social media and food media was that individuals could have their own definitions of comfort food. This definition could be a conscious expression of values and tastes as well as a reflection of personal histories that shaped which foods were comforting to them. For example, one reader in response to the article on convenience food stated emphatically that the foods she chooses for “stress eating” differ from the ones suggested in the article. That choice, furthermore, reflects her personal history. She writes, “I’m doing all I can to improve my immune system. That means eating healthy...I’m stress eating like everyone else but that means fruit and vegetables and a very good glass of wine now and then” (April 8, 2020, Bernice K., NYC).

An article on baking acknowledged the individuality of the readers in its title: “21 Quarantine Baking Recipes for Every Skill Level,” specifying: “Whether you’re a beginner or an experienced baker, you’ll find ideas to help pass the time with delicious results...For some, baking is a regular affair, while, for others, it’s a big-deal project...Feel free to jump between categories as ambition and taste dictate” (Laskey). This emphasis on the reader being able to assert their own interpretation of the comfort food genre can be interpreted as reflecting an ethos of individualism, the belief that “the ultimate source of action, meaning, and responsibility is the individual rather than the group” (Fischer 364). This individualism is an essential part of the American character and a driving force in the ways in which history has unfolded and society has developed. In theory,

individuals are expected to make their own choices about their lives and then take responsibility for the outcomes.

Scholars have problematized the concept, pointing out that there are different kinds of individualism and multiple ways of asserting it (Grabb et al.), but it is evident in much of American popular culture, including food (Counihan 1992). Restaurants, for example, are expected to cater to individual preferences, allowing “add-ons” or deletions of ingredients according to taste, religion, ethical values, or health concerns.⁴

Diversity in American Society and Food Culture. This individualism in defining what can be considered comfort foods may have existed below the surface but it emerged publicly during the pandemic. Everyone had their own memories attached to food, and those memories were treated as valid interpretations of their personal comfort foods. This individualism, ironically, led to an expanding of what could be considered comfort food, and that expansion represented a more accurate portrayal of the diversity of American society than offered previously. For example, one response in the comments to the *New York Times* article on convenience foods, points out that the assumed norm of comfort foods is not accurate for everyone. Identifying themselves as based in Mexico, the writer points to class, ethnicity and even ethos as the basis for a different consideration of what constitutes the genre:

I grew up on a poor working class diet, meaning meat and potatoes and veg. Rarely desert (birthdays and holidays) and never processed foods (they were more expensive in the 50s and 60s). I raised my daughter on a basic counterculture/hippie diet, sometimes even grinding my own wheat. None of what you listed is comfort food for me. (*New York Times*, April 8, 2020.)

Food media also began recognizing this diversity, acknowledging that U.S. Americans come from many places and can therefore have diverse memories of childhood. Nostalgia can be different for each of us. The result was a celebration and exploration of diverse ethnic heritages as the basis for a broader variety of dishes considered comfort food. Typical of this celebration was a December 2020 article, titled “What Comfort Food Looks Like to People Around the world: Six people who turned their love for food into careers tell us about the flavors that nourish their souls” (Parogni). The article then gives short vignettes of 6 dishes,

⁴ The success of Burger King’s slogan “Have it Your Way” that has been popular since 1974 suggests that individualism is alive and well.

each of which represented childhood memories: *pandan* cake (London's Chinatown), *mollete* (Mexico City), plantain (Ghana), *katsu sando* (Japan), wild blueberries (Minnesota), and *aa'atar manousheh* (Lebanon).

These dishes all represent non-white, non-European culinary cultures, affirming the unspoken bias of comfort food as a mainstream American construction. Even the wild blueberries, which could be shared with numerous residents of the United States is given a specific ethnic identity, that of the indigenous Dakota nation. Interestingly, this diversity is presented here as global rather than national, but there was a similar expanding throughout the pandemic in other food media of the genre to include foods representing diverse backgrounds. An article in May of 2020 suggested an Italian dish as a comfort food. It reads, "Gone global? With only three simple ingredients, *cacio e pepe* is a rich pasta dish that's hard not to love. And when you do get that elusive texture, it becomes the ideal comfort food" (Monaco).

These presentations of comfort foods representing diverse identities and experiences for some individuals may reflect the "foodie" trend in contemporary U.S. American food culture. Corresponding to other social trends of identifying oneself by one's interests, foodies were seen as creating "distinction" and social status through their all-consuming obsession with food (Johnston and Baumann). This obsession, oftentimes criticized as elitist, included being adventurous in one's eating experiences. Tasting new foods was applauded, in contrast to a long-standing neophobia and xenophobia that had characterized mainstream American food culture. Exposure to these other approaches to food, however, has also raised questions around the healthfulness to society, the environment, and to individuals, of that culture. The pandemic has created an occasion for trying out "alternative" foodways practices, values, and beliefs.

Comfort Food and Culinary Relativism

This widespread acknowledgment – and celebration – of diversity in comfort foods means more than a trendy exploration of new frontiers of tastes and food experiences. This acceptance of different food cultures and their various belief systems about food and eating can be interpreted as the emergence of what I refer to as "culinary relativism," borrowing from the anthropological concept of cultural relativism in which it is argued that a culture should be evaluated on its

own terms and that no cultures can be objectively judged as better or worse than others (Boas).

Applied to food, relativism suggests that if we want to understand what, why, and how a group eats, we need to place their foodways practices, beliefs, and tastes within their particular history, natural environment, culture, and economic-political conditions. While practices may differ from our own, they do not reflect a culture of lesser moral quality or intelligence, even when they challenge our own perceptions of edibility or palatability. Similarly, each individual's food universe should be understood within their own history of experiences and identities. Differences in cookery skills or approaches to food exist, and they might not be to one's own liking or values, but the concept of culinary relativism offers a perspective for understanding what food means to individuals and specific groups, and how and why those meanings developed.

Comfort food from this perspective can therefore include any food or foodways practice that fulfills the needs identified as belonging to this genre. One of those needs is nostalgia, and if comfort foods are those dishes that satisfy nostalgia, then they would naturally reflect the diverse backgrounds of individuals today. That diversity represents the realities of contemporary (and past) American society in which citizens possess a variety of identities, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion, all of which then shape the personal histories of individuals. A multicultural society would by definition then allow for a variety of dishes to be considered comfort food. It would also challenge the authority to define this genre – an authority historically held by the upper and middle-class white, western European, Protestant based segment of society.

During the pandemic, this culinary relativism around comfort food was encouraged by digital technologies now widely available and accessible, enabling us to communicate with people all over the world. Social media as well as more official media outlets made us aware of what other people were cooking and eating. These outlets also showed us different ingredients and dishes being consumed for comfort, expanding the notion of what foods could fit into the genre of comfort food and affirming both the individualism and the relativism of the genre. My own observations suggest that the popularity of the concept of comfort food has spread across the globe, but it is unclear whether it carries an American food ethos and aesthetic. Further study on the continued spread of the genre would be useful in determining whether glocalised adaptations of comfort food are challenging the morality attached to it in the United States.

Expanding the Genre: From Comfort Food to Foods That Comfort

I argue here that comfort food has been redefined during the pandemic. No longer a genre carrying a specific cultural ethos and history, these foods are exactly what the name suggests: foods that comfort. Eating them brings some sort of solace, and that is publicly recognized as an important function especially needed during the pandemic, regardless of what their consumption might formerly have implied about the moral character of the eater. Everyone now can turn guilt-free to such dishes for comfort and emotional sustenance.

Two media stories illustrate this redefining of comfort food. The first is a review in the *New York Times* of two companies offering *challah* (a Jewish bread) by mail. Observing that such companies are “bringing [it] into the mainstream,” the reviewer describes the products offered by one entrepreneur, pointing out that they are from his childhood. He writes, “The boxes are inspired by the ‘potluck of different cultures,’ as Blanks puts it, that inform the cuisine in Israel, and especially by dishes that bring him comfort” (Goldfield).

The second story expands the concept of comfort food to encompass the relationships and social contexts that sharing food can evoke. In this case, it is not the food itself that comforts, but the pleasure that comes from preparing and consuming it. Referring to the famous chef, cookbook writer, and cooking teacher, Julia Child, Julie Cohen claims that numerous people turned to her for inspiration during the pandemic – and found comfort. The article’s title suggests the broader approach to comfort food: “More than comfort Food: Julia Child has provided the comfort the pandemic-wracked world has craved.” Cohen then asks why Child “is resonating so profoundly during the age of Covid?” She provides an answer to her own question, “Part of it is nostalgia, of course, and the simple fact that cooking in a home kitchen for one’s own pod is one of the few epidemiologically correct joys available to us” Cohen then observes that this comfort comes from fulfilling the need to belong: “For Julia, creating and devouring a meal were acts of intense connection. That’s what we want and what gives us pleasure.”

This article is especially interesting given that Child emphasized French cooking and refined culinary training, both of which are usually outside the genre of comfort food. She even spoke dismissively of cooks who did not care about the intricacies of cooking technique and wanted to serve comfort food (Spitz). That

Child can now be drawn into that category shows a reworking and expansion of what constitutes it. No longer perceived as foods that need justification in order to be consumed, the genre includes any food that brings comfort in any way.

Concluding Thoughts

Comfort food is a socially constructed category that reflects the ethos and history of U.S. American food culture. The concept seems to have moved from an original emic genre being used by the general public to morally justify their eating behaviors to an etic one used by scholars to analyze those behaviors, then back again to an emic one now being redefined by a much more diverse national and perhaps global community.

The redefinition reflects other trends and concerns in contemporary U.S. American culture, most prominently, the individualism fundamental to that culture. It also reflects current realities of the nation as made up of individuals with diverse heritages, identities, personalities, values, and tastes. If each person can have their own comfort food, then the expectation of which dishes constitute the genre has to be broadened to include that multiplicity of individuals. Social media as well as formal, official food media outlets then began celebrating a much wider range of comfort foods.

On the one hand, this can be seen as representing an attitude of cosmopolitanism towards ones' eating habits that characterizes "foodie" trends, but it also reflects, I feel, an emerging culinary relativism that allows for all of those tastes to be considered meaningful and valid. The shift from an emic category to etic and then back to emic seems to extend beyond the expansion of American food culture to be inclusive of diverse culinary traditions. It also brings in diverse approaches to food itself and perhaps even to the idea of comfort. Food is recognized as having the power to transform individuals, situations, and even communities. Comfort, similarly, is being expanded beyond transitory and individualistic feelings, to a deeper sense of personal value and meaningfulness. Furthermore, there seems to be an awareness developing that comfort can be found in the range of activities around food, not only in the consumption of specific dishes or ingredients. Shopping for groceries, gardening, canning, baking, setting a table for a meal, the sharing of food, and any other event or practice around eating could be a meaningful source for comfort.

And finally, this redefinition reflects a shift in cultural authority. The genre itself seemed to come out of the vernacular culture of generic “people,” specifically those who were struggling with body weight issues. It was borrowed – “appropriated” even – by the food industry, but also given a more analytical meaning by medical sociologists, nutritionists, and psychologists. During the pandemic, “the people,” largely through social media platforms, but also in collaboration with “the experts” in food media, restaurant, and cookbook industries, have taken back the phrase and established it with a new definition – that of “foods that comfort.” This genre is free from the moral associations of the earlier one and allows for individual interpretations, adaptations, and innovations of both food and comfort.

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