During the cooler months, we often seek out the foods that evoke the tastes and memories of childhood. They almost seem to have healing properties.

The temperature has dropped, the days are shorter, the leaves have changed colors, and we’re still raking them up from the lawn. And then it snows. There is nothing like snowfall to drive our desire for comfort foods. Who wants a bowl of tomato gazpacho at this time of year?

What is comfort food anyway? While researching this concept, to figure out how to define “comfort food,” I found out I don’t have enough time or energy to make that determination. If I actually came up with a definition, the majority of you would change the definition as it fits for you anyway.

It seems to me the term “comfort” is the variable.

- Yourdictionary.com provides this definition: to give a sense of peace to someone.
- Dictionary.com provides this definition: to soothe, console, or reassure; bring cheer
- The freedictionary.com helps prove my point the best, as they have several definitions:
  1. To soothe in time of affliction or distress.
  2. To ease physically; relieve.
  3. A condition or feeling of pleasurable ease, well being, and contentment.
  4. Solace in time of grief or fear.
  5. One that brings or provides comfort.
  6. The capacity to give physical ease and well-being.
Comfort foods from all over the world are getting gussied up. We are taking what is already wonderful and upgrading, taking from other cuisines and making them our own new comfort food.

As all of these definitions apply, it just depends on the different situations that life throws our way. I am amazed how, at different times and with different circumstances, I can pick a certain food that fits each of these descriptions. My cravings for comfort food range from the chocolate chip cookie with Rice Krispies that I made as a kid to the charcuterie and pâté I ate on lazy Sundays when I lived in France and to a good bowl of Jewish chicken kreplach soup when I wasn’t feeling well. So I will let you decide for yourself what comfort food means for you.

Psychology of Food

Comfort food does seem to have its own psychology. It can bring back memories of the past—those wonderful foods that we remember from childhood and memories of being taken care of. Comfort food has that secret ingredient that almost brings us healing powers. Combined with a comfy couch and our favorite pooch, it can ignite all those feelings of security, happiness, and well-being.

Life is always throwing curve balls though, so don’t beat yourself up for prescribing yourself a pint of triple chocolate fudge ice cream. Studies have shown that comfort foods do more than just satisfy cravings; they literally change your brain chemistry. Comfort food can soothe your psyche.

Let’s get serious for a moment. During stressful times your body will be craving carbohydrates. Stress causes our bodies to break down serotonin. Researchers believe that an imbalance of serotonin may influence mood in a way that leads to depression. Eating foods high in carbohydrates triggers the body to release insulin, which then allows the brain to produce serotonin. What yummy foods might this include? We’re talking fried chicken, lasagna, and macaroni and cheese.

Pho / Vietnamese Beef Noodle Soup

*Ingredients for 4 large bowls*

**FOR THE BROTH:**
3 large onions  
1 Tbsp. peanut oil  
5 lbs. combination of meaty beef and chicken bones  
4 ginger slices julienne  
2 carrots julienne  
1 small stick cinnamon  
1 star anise  
2 whole cloves  
1 tsp. whole black peppercorn  
2 cloves garlic, unpeeled, smashed

**SOUP GARNISHES:**
2 cups (1/2 lb.) fresh bean sprouts  
12 raw beef sirloin slices, very thin across grain, season with salt and pepper  
2 scallions, finely sliced  
1 cup cilantro sprigs  
1 cup Thai basil sprigs  
2 limes cut into wedges  
4 fresh red or green Thai chilies, sliced  
8 ounces rice sticks (soaked in hot water for 30 minutes, drained)  
2-3 Tbsp. fish sauce (nuoc mam / nam pla)  
Fresh black pepper to taste
Curling Up With Mashed Potatoes

Who doesn’t crave comfort food this time of year? Conventional wisdom says that as the temperature outside starts dropping, our metabolism improves and therefore we can bump up the calorie count in our foods. When it is cold outside our bodies tend to crave comfort foods such as hot soups, mashed potatoes, stews, chocolate, coffee, biscuits and gravy, and fried chicken.

Maybe we’re craving these comfort foods because there is more to them than meets the eye.

Let’s look at a big helping of mashed potatoes. They contain only 66 calories, and its small percentage of carbohydrates keeps you feeling full for longer. They are a good source of vitamins B and C, and contain folate.

Chocolate, my personal favorite, contains a saturate known as stearic acid, which does not raise cholesterol levels. It is a rich source of iron and has high levels of polyphenols, or compounds found in plant-based foods, which act as antioxidants and help protect against serious diseases such as cancer.

And what about the benefits of chicken noodle soup? Researchers at the University of Nebraska Medical Center found that chicken soup can help reduce inflammation in nasal cells. The chicken is a rich source of protein, and carrots are a rich in vitamin A.

Demand for more healthful foods, gourmet ingredients and bolder flavors are challenging chefs to take the foods we love and put the flavors back together in sort of a fancy schmancy way.

Call it a food makeover. Comfort foods from all over the world are getting gussied up. We are taking what is already wonderful and upgrading, taking from other cuisines and making them our own new comfort food.

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Pies are being made with fresh, seasonal filling. Macaroni and cheese can be found in many reincarnations with artisan cheeses, herbs, and organic ingredients. Meat loafs and meatballs are being made with combinations of meats, such as veal, beef, pork, and even braised meats.

Pho/Vietnamese soups and ramen soups are full of flavor and very healthful and always on my top 10 comfort food list. Indian and Thai curries and sushi are the current “it food” and global flavors are enhancing comfort classics.

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**METHOD.**

**FOR THE BROTH:** Slice two of the onions into 1/4 inch slices. Heat 1 Tbsp. oil in a frying pan. Add the sliced onion, and cook, stirring, until the outside has browned. Remove and drain. Rinse the bones and place in a stockpot. Cover with cold water. Bring slowly to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer, uncovered. For a clear broth, skim off foam. After 10-15 minutes, add browned onion and ginger, carrots, cinnamon, cardamom, star anise, cloves, garlic, and peppercorns. Bring to a boil. Simmer the stock, partially covered for 6 hours, skimming regularly. If necessary, add more water to keep the bones covered. Strain the stock, skim off, and discard any fat.

**SOUP GARNISH:** On a small platter, arrange the bean sprouts, cilantro, Thai basil, chilies, and limes.

**FOR THE NOODLES:** Meanwhile, plunge the rice sticks in 9 cups of boiling water. Let cook for 5 minutes and drain. Keep warm.

**TO SERVE:** Divide the noodles among four bowls. Arrange reserved thinly sliced white onion and scallions on top of noodles. Reheat beef stock to boiling. Season with fish sauce and pepper. Ladle broth just to cover noodles. The heat from the broth will cook the meat. Serve the platter of garnishes at the table. Add the bean sprouts, coriander, chilies, and lime to taste. Enjoy with chopsticks and a soup spoon. Optional: fish sauce, ground peanuts, hoisin sauce, or siracha sauce at the table.