

WHITE PAPER



COMFORT & CONVENIENCE

Consumers Reach for it All



com·fort food

/'kæmfərt foʊd/

noun

food that provides consolation or a feeling of well-being, often associated with childhood or home cooking (nostalgic or sentimental appeal)



A recent Atlantic magazine article titled, “Americans Have Baked All the Flour Away,” discusses the phenomenon of citizens of this country baking away their anxieties. Grocery store shelves were laid bare this past spring, first of household essentials like disinfectants, followed by food staples.¹ One shelf-stable product with “no obvious link to cleanliness or quarantine” that swiftly disappeared was flour. King Arthur Baking Company reported its sales skyrocketed 2,000%.²

This baking frenzy is one snapshot of the practices and products Americans used as a panacea to comfort themselves during uncertain times, causing an uptick in sales of flavors and foods that fall under the broad umbrella of “comfort foods.” Datassential, one of many research firms attempting to supply relevant and timely consumer data during the pandemic, reported a third of consumers saying they were choosing comfort foods more often since the onset of COVID-19. This made the pursuit of comfort foods one of the biggest changes to their daily eating routine.³

Psychology Behind Comfort Foods

People pursue comfort food in order to alter their emotional state. *Psychology Today* reports that individuals prefer the taste of comfort food after experiencing a threat or eat more comfort food in response to “naturally occurring feelings of isolation.” Comfort foods help alleviate loneliness by “priming thoughts of positive social interactions,” according to one article.⁴ We use food for emotional support and a form of self-medication when under psychological stress.⁵

Beyond consumption, the *act* of making a comfort food can supply a psychological boost as well.



Baking, for example, is a mindful, meditative, healthy distraction and fits within a literal type of therapy called “behavioral activation.” When a person is deeply engaged with a form of creative expression that requires their full attention, it helps cultivate a sense of control and accomplishment.



The concentration and attention required to complete the task pushes away negative thoughts to allow a mental escape from the

current environment. Furthermore, baking helps restore a sense of community because the results can be shared with others.⁶

Comfort foods however aren't restricted to baked goods. They can encompass almost any type of food depending on a person's background, culture and upbringing. Part of their power lies in their ability "to connect us with people through memories of past social experiences, such as birthdays or holidays."⁷ This means that comfort food consumption isn't restricted to times of anxiety but is more prevalent. People are "as likely to turn to comfort foods when they want to stop feeling bad as they do when they want to celebrate feeling good."

CPG Feels the Love

Speaking of feeling good, traditional brands are feeling the love from consumers who turned to nostalgic favorites as comfort food during state lockdowns. The nostalgic element of comfort foods explains in part, why during the pandemic, CPG brands enjoyed sales increases of up to 34% or more comparing year-over-year data.⁸ Brands that were in a slow but steady decline for years were rediscovered by older consumers, and subsequently exposed to a new generation during pandemic purchasing as their parents sought "comfort from a time past."

One research firm, Credit Suisse, says larger food companies are underestimating the impact of the coronavirus on at-home food consumption. It anticipates sales volume will remain elevated in the months ahead, although not at the same historic levels. Consumers continue to spend more time at home cooking and baking and many are still avoiding large public gatherings.⁹

While brands are "getting great exposure," some experts say this surge might last another 12 months, and in order to retain market share past that timeframe, here are just a few of their recommendations:

- elevate messages related to nutritional value
- educate consumers about pairing up packaged foods with fresh ingredients to create healthier meals
- add greater functionality or nutritional value in existing brands or brand extensions¹⁰



Throughout decades of modern food manufacturing, REAL egg products demonstrate their incredible reliability as a formulation staple, supplying an excellent nutritional profile along with more than 20 functional properties, including aeration, binding, coagulation, emulsification, foaming, and whipping, to name just a few. Find the full list of benefits: www.incredibleegg.org/professionals/manufacturers/real-egg-functionality

Anxiety Baking or The Case of the Disappearing Flour

The quarantine produced an interesting phenomenon of disappearing products as evidenced by a baking trend timeline. First, store shelves were emptied of ready-made bread loaves. In response to this, consumers purchased flour and yeast to bake their own breads at home.

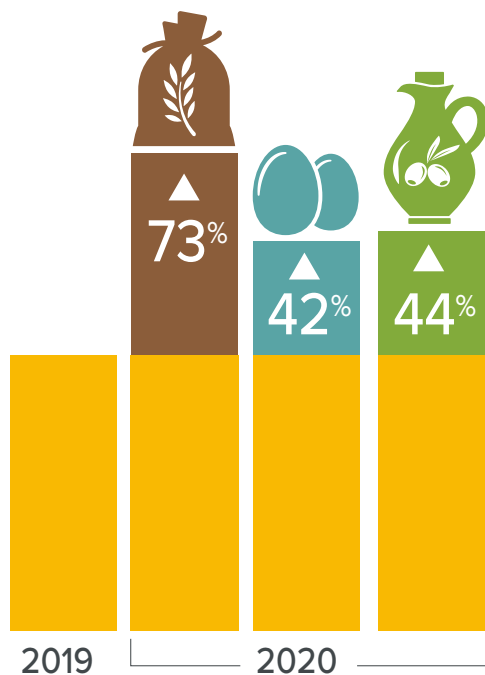


According to Nielsen, yeast sales spiked an astonishing 647% at the end of March compared to the year prior, outpacing any other single product the company tracks.¹¹



Once yeast proved hard to find, this sparked the sourdough craze. And reportedly, banana bread experienced its own moment during the quarantine, with Google reporting it one of six most-searched foods/recipes on the web in May of this year.¹²

Swiss giant Nestle reported early in the pandemic quarantine (late March) that products such as refrigerated cookie dough, chocolate chips and evaporated milk were flying off the shelves. According to King Arthur Baking Co., “Americans decided they all needed flour at the same time.” Nielsen data backs this up. Volume sales of staples and ingredients rose, with flour sales posting a 73% increase compared to a year ago, eggs 42% and olive oil 44% (week ending May 16, 2020).



Nostalgic Flavors

More than one company predicted an increased consumer preference for nostalgic flavors, a trend only reinforced by the pandemic. Kroger Co.’s 2020 food trends report released in January proved prescient, saying nostalgic flavors would grow in retail innovation this year.



Nostalgic flavors reminiscent of childhood favorites also topped the list of Imbibe’s 2020 predictions for beverages, such as s’mores, birthday cake and creamsicle.



The firm sees this trend continuing as consumers look for flavors that “fulfill emotional needs.”¹³

Birthday cake, for example, is a universal favorite at the moment. One recent slideshow depicted Rice Krispies Treats, Quest protein bars, truffles, a high-protein peanut spread and more, made with birthday cake flavor and sprinkles.¹⁴

This doesn’t mean that global flavors and ethnic trends are out, just presented in a different way. As one IFT presenter noted, consumers have scaled back on experimentation. While they want global food, they want it in the form of comfort food that falls within their comfort zone of familiar, authentic ingredients coupled with a transparent supply chain.¹⁵

Quest for Authenticity

Sprinkles aside, according to Innova Market Insights, consumers expect formulators to eschew the artificial and turn to natural ingredients whenever possible. Seventy-two percent of those surveyed want manufacturers to reduce or remove certain ingredients to create healthier products. This trend predates the pandemic, but global uncertainty has moved it from a trend to a firm expectation.¹⁶

This is particularly true in the baking category. The most recent 2020 Food & Health

Survey conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) states that “natural” label claims remain the “most influential” both for grocery shopping and prepared food purchased, or food prepared outside of the home. Consumers are looking for short ingredient lists with a clean label. COVID-19 has simply made this demand “more intense.”¹⁷

Meal Kits Surge

Meal kits fit the current mood to prepare more food at home, while still offering a convenient format that speeds preparation time. It also gives consumers the opportunity to explore new ingredients or flavors within confined parameters—there is a small amount, prepped for a single meal.

Consequently, meal kit companies surged in popularity during the first half of the year. One leading company, HelloFresh saw its active U.S. customers swell 90% during the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same time period last year. Customers 60 years old and up comprise the age group most attracted to their services. Meal kit services can help reduce grocery store outings as a no-contact delivery option. Some services are simplifying things even further with an oven-ready meal option that allows consumers to prepare a meal in less than 10 minutes.¹⁸

“Cooking” at Home? Make it Convenient

While more Americans (70%) spent extra time in the kitchen cooking at home during the past several months, nearly half of us are a bit tired of it.¹⁹

Making it easier for consumers who want to cook at home but like the convenience of a quick meal, restaurants and institutions switched up their business models to not only offer curbside pickup and delivery, but also their own version of a meal kit. DIY options are available from Shake Shack, California Pizza Kitchen and Waffle House, to name a few, with the famous Waffle House mix requiring just two additional ingredients: an egg and some half-and-half.²⁰

Although we like to claim we’re eating healthier, a *Forbes* article revealed that by a three-to-one margin, when ordering delivery or pickup, customers “are more likely to order comfort food (53%) than healthier foods (18%).” For some members of younger generational cohorts, this might mean a plant-based dish, as they are among the population identified by the DoorDash delivery service that is ordering plant-based burgers, with orders for this style food surging 443% in 2020.

Snacking Soars

One research firm that specializes in fast-moving consumer goods reported half of 23,000 consumers surveyed across 18 countries said they snacked more in May, up from 38% of consumers who reported that behavior in April. Sales of instant coffee, cookies and chocolates rose, and 60% of those surveyed said they bought more comfort foods. Mondelez reported an increase in snacking with “strong momentum” highlighted in chocolate and cookie sales.²¹



Iconic snack cakes like the ubiquitous Hostess Twinkie and other sweet pastries have been flying off grocery store shelves as Americans alter their buying habits.²²



Snacks across all channels, according to IRI research, spiked in March with sales increasing above 35% compared to the year prior. Volume remained high with single-digit percent increases in the following weeks.²³

Market experts do predict a shift from snacks as comfort food to more mindful, healthy choices as life shifts to a new normal. Those who noticed weight gain due to increased snacking are more aware of calorie, sugar and salt consumption and looking for healthier choices that satisfy cravings, such as those with measurable protein content.^{24, 25}



Looking for a nutrient-dense ingredient, packed with protein, that also supplies functional benefits for snack formulating? Look no further than REAL eggs. www.incredibleegg.org/professionals/manufacturers/product-development/market-trends/eggaminer-newsletter/spring-2019

Frozen Food Aisle Ablaze

The pandemic also pushed consumers back to the center of the store as they sought food items that could withstand longer storage times. The American Frozen Food Institute (AFFI) recorded a huge surge in buying patterns with 70% of current frozen food customers buying more frozen food than usual. “Hot” items in the frozen section included vegetables, meat/poultry and pizza, but other categories also experienced double-digit sales increases. Frozen baked goods saw a 56.2% bump in purchases, ice cream 35.9%, breakfast food 50.2% and frozen snacks leapt 82.2% (for the four weeks ending April 5, 2020, compared to the same time period a year ago).²⁶

A preseason “surge” led to booming retail ice cream sales, with ice cream and frozen novelties posting 34% and 35% growth

respectively for the week ending May 3, 2020, compared to the year before, according to Information Resources Inc. Not all of it was indulgent, with better-for-you ice cream also benefitting during these uncertain times. Peekaboo Ice Cream launched unicorn swirl and cookie dough flavors, with stealth-health ingredients like zucchini while relying on authenticity via fresh cream and whole eggs.²⁷

Bakeries Repackage, Reposition

The bakery section of the grocery store might have seen the biggest change in set up and offerings due to changed purchasing habits. Self-serve has given way to fresh grab-and-go packaged products. According to an International Dairy Deli Bakery Association report for sales ending the week of May 24, packaged baked goods are still performing well compared to sales a year ago. While indulgent baked goods suffered for a while, sales are now seeing a slight uptick as consumers feel the need to treat themselves after emerging from shutdowns.²⁸

Either that or they were baking treats at home. The site Chowhound released the Google-ranked top-searched recipes in each state during quarantine, and hamburger, bread, cinnamon rolls and sourdough were popular in many areas. Utah was the lone holdout for crepes.

In the bakery and elsewhere, consumers find security, say some marketers, in recognizable ingredients “without chemical-sounding names.” Consumers express confidence that packaged baked goods that use real ingredients are fresh, free from contaminants, and better for the body.²⁹



REAL egg ingredients positively impact baked goods taste, texture, appearance and even aroma according to a body of research conducted by industry professionals. Find the results detailing their impact on everything from sponge cake to pie filling: www.realleggs.org

Bring Me My Breakfast!

Restaurants and institutions that wondered what might happen to their normal drive-through breakfast business, as customers switched from commuting to working at home, found DoorDash and Uber Eats came to the rescue. Consumer online spending for fast-food chain breakfast items almost doubled in March and April. Breakfast burritos were the seventh-most ordered item on DoorDash so far in 2020.³⁰

Eggs most definitely enjoy their status as a highly favored breakfast item. Although not quite new, egg bites have been trending. Starbucks introduced this menu item in 2017 where they grew in popularity due to their protein content, premium quality and versatility. New retail options help consumers prepare these mini-meals at home, and consumers aren't shy about sharing their ideas and creations on social media. Look for the #eggbites hashtag on Instagram.³¹



A century from now, historians will look back and see, among other things, a society that leaned on comfort foods to help them scale the heights to better times.



Whether we cooked at home, shared fresh baked goods or ordered delivery, comfort foods helped sustain our bodies while lifting our spirits. Regardless of the definition of comfort foods a hundred years hence, we're certain it will be delicious, enjoyable and somehow include eggs.

Value Added Products

Egg producers supply a variety of different forms of eggs depending on the end application, including dried, liquid or frozen whole eggs, egg yolks and egg whites. There is an equally impressive array of value-added, prepared egg products that can speed production and supply a nutritious yet tasty ingredient to comfort foods of many varieties, from frozen foods, such as handheld sandwiches and bowls to heat-and-eat frozen meals or meal kits. For a full listing, visit www.incredibleegg.org/professionals/manufacturers/technical-resources/egg-products/value-added-convenience-products

For a few ideas, consider these products:



Patties – egg patties are prepared in the round, ready to set on a biscuit, bun or muffin. Find them in whole egg or egg white formats and pair them with an endless array of breakfast sausages or veggies and cheese for a filling, handheld breakfast sandwich for the frozen food aisle or C-store formats. Egg patties are easy to heat in the microwave or oven to help create a quick, grab-and-go snack or meal.



Omelets, Scrambles

– These products are easy to drop into the frozen production line for any number of applications from handheld burritos and other rolled sandwiches, to breakfast bowls or complete breakfast meals that consumers heat up swiftly in the microwave.



Whole, peeled hard-boiled eggs –

Include these in a meal kit, pair up with spices or dips for a hearty, nutritious and filling protein-based snack. Serve with an easy dip or dust or include them with prepacked salads for a flavorful, protein boost.

Comfort in REAL Eggs

The complimentary Made with REAL Eggs® certification seal courtesy of the American Egg Board improves overall perception of quality for both retail outlets and foodservice segments. When displayed on packaged prepared foods or menu boards, food wrappers or product displays, the seal can add an extra layer of reassurance for a consumer populace already in tune with package callouts and seeking the familiar in uncertain times. Made with REAL Eggs® seals let consumers know at a glance that a product contains all-natural eggs.

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About the American Egg Board (AEB)

The American Egg Board (AEB) is the research, education and promotion arm of the U.S. egg industry. Its mission is to increase demand for eggs and egg products through research and education. The AEB supports American egg farmers by promoting the consistent high-quality and functionality of U.S. eggs and egg products. Visit AEB.org for more information.

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