

What's Old is New Again: There's Comfort in Eggs

By Jeanne Turner



Thai Stuffed Omelets

An omelet serves as the perfect blank canvas to combine a variety of spices, vegetables, meat or cheese to create a healthy meal, and egg ingredients offer formulators and foodservice operators safe and easy options for fresh meal creations.

Comfort foods—every country has them. And while gender¹ and cultural differences exist, almost universally a comfort food evokes pleasant memories. Comfort foods help soothe anxiety and stress while satisfying a deep longing for a return to simpler times.

As economic challenges continue, all indicators point to consumers seeking comfort foods.

Popular web sites such as Epicurious.com and NPR food commentator Bonny Wolf agree that the top food trend identified for 2009 is 'comfort.'² The words "comfort, value and simplicity," she says, will sum up the culinary scene.

"We're in uncertain times, and this is the time when we crave comfort food," Wolf says.

Comfort foods are part of a larger trend that sees Americans returning to the basics. They're eating at home more. The web site Allrecipes.com conducted its Annual Food Trend Forecast at the end of 2008 and 80 percent of respondents said they plan to cook at home more in 2009 to help manage food budgets while 61 percent reported eating out less in 2008. The Food Marketing Institute's U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2008 reports 71 percent of consumers polled say they're eating more leftovers.

They're trying to save money. The auto repair industry is booming as

consumers fix rather than replace big-ticket items.³ Spending on food overall is down. Fourth quarter 2008 consumer food spending witnessed its steepest decline in more than half a century, according to the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis.

The good news is that although consumers might be searching for ways to spend money more wisely, they are still stocking the pantry. And while the economy might have slowed down, the American lifestyle has not. Consumers still need prepared food solutions to make meal preparation easier. One answer for food formulators navigating the tricky waters of supplying comfort foods on a budget is using the egg as an ingredient.

"You cannot find a better economical choice for a high-quality multi-functional protein source," says Marcia Greenblum, M.S., R.D., director, Nutrition and Food Safety Education for the Egg Nutrition Center, Washington, D.C. "Egg ingredients are economical in terms of price/value to the formulator and economical in terms of total calorie count they add to a formulation."

incredible!



American Egg Board
aeb.org

New American comfort food

When thinking ‘comfort food,’ don’t try to recreate 1950. Young parents are passing down their sophisticated tastes for the emergence of America’s first generation of health-conscious ‘little foodies.’⁴ Baby boomers’ food behaviors and demands differ dramatically from previous ‘senior’ populations. You can’t turn the clock back on taste buds that have been trained to distinguish between for example, browned butter versus simple melted butter flavor.

What food manufacturers can do is help consumers recreate chef-quality meals at home. Comfort foods today are healthier and more creative than their original counterparts, yet provide the memories and evoke the emotional warmth of a comfort food.

The next challenge is to define comfort food. It can be as traditional as chocolate layer cake or an offering a bit more adventuresome.

The Atwood Café in Chicago, Illinois, focuses on upscale American comfort foods. Top chef Heather Terhune notes: “People seem to be looking for comfort food more often these days. They think of it as more filling, and it reminds them of home.” She says the restaurant has been selling a lot more of its signature dessert item, banana bread pudding, “it uses a lot of eggs, cream, bananas and chocolate. You can’t lose with eggs; they’re familiar, economical and filling.”

A contingency of regulars keep business brisk at the Open City Diner in Washington D.C. Comfort foods are a menu foundation at the diner because, according to chef Courtney Parks, they “hit the buttons people respond to.”

Yet the comfort foods served there come with a twist. “Our consumers are sophisticated when it comes to ingredients,” Parks says, when referring to macaroni and cheese made with lobster, or the maple and brown sugar cured bacon that accompanies an omelet.

When it comes to dessert however, publications such as *Restaurants and Institutions* discuss consumer ‘culinary caution’ with experimentation, particularly in regard to dessert⁵ and report more traditional fare is selling the best. Cake sales are steady at in-store bakeries, a venue ripe with opportunity for prepared food to cross over into the foodservice market.⁶

Breakfast anytime of day

This comfort food yearning is having a ripple effect on meal dayparts. What once was traditional breakfast fare is more often now appearing on dinner tables. An NPD Group study shows that 44 percent of breakfast food servings at major family-style chains were eaten at dayparts other than in the morning. And respondents to a different survey, asking senior citizens about food choices during a one-week period

checked off eggs as one of their top food choices for dinner.

Neva Cochran, M.S., R.D., L.D., nutrition communications consultant says, “Eggs were a staple in the home when I grew up. A large shell egg contains only 75 calories, so in an omelet mixed with vegetables or some low fat cheese, it poses an excellent economical and nutritious vehicle for creating a healthy comfort food.”

Cochran says there has been an unfair perception of eggs, “perhaps because of the foods they were traditionally partnered with bacon, sausage, biscuits and gravy. But what we have is a high-quality protein in an inexpensive package, containing other nutrients including choline, vitamin D, lutein and zeaxanthin.” Choline is an essential nutrient that contributes to fetal brain and memory development and may also reduce the risk of breast cancer. Lutein and zeaxanthin are two nutrients that are part of the carotenoid family and have been shown to contribute to eye health, assisting with preventing macular degeneration that can lead to blindness. Eggs contain small amounts of these nutrients, but research shows they may be more bioavailable (better utilized by the body) from eggs than from sources with higher content. Eggs are also one of the few foods to naturally contain vitamin D, a nutrient associated with bone health. Cochran adds, “You can



Cherry Madelines

A mid-afternoon cookie break can satisfy that comfort food longing while remaining within portion control guidelines. Egg ingredients lend aeration and structure to cookie formulations.



Meringue-Capped Kiwi Custard

Exotic fruits appeal to a sophisticated palate and lend visual interest to traditional custard. The finishing touch — a fluffy meringue compliments of egg whites’ superior foaming properties.



French Silk Pie

Chocolate, the original comfort food, works well in combination with egg ingredients due to their consistent supply, excellent functional properties and reasonable price point.

eat eggs and have your comfort without sacrificing good health.”

Comfort foods are on the menu anytime and they can appear anywhere, from brown baggers on up. White tablecloth restaurants serve comfort foods, says Eric Sparks, C.E.C., director of product development for Park 100 Foods, Inc., Tipton, Indiana, “They might upgrade the quality of the protein, but a comfort food is about a lack of preconceived notions, more pleasure of eating something relaxing rather than food to critique,” he says. Busy lives also demand comfort food that is portable and hand held, such as breakfast sandwiches. And this demand for comfort food spurs a correlating demand for ingredients that not only are satisfying, filling and tasty, but also are economical in price, to help make comfort foods an affordable luxury.

Egg ingredients a comfort to formulators

Processors have reduced the functional difference between frozen liquid and dried eggs so preference today is dictated in terms of end-user requirements. Liquid eggs, for example, are especially convenient for the fast-food industry as interest in hand-held breakfast sandwiches continues in popularity. Dried eggs offer prepared food manufacturers the advantages of shelf-stability and easier storage. Dried eggs provide functional and nutritional benefits without any added liquid.



Hot and Sour Soup

Savory dishes can spell ‘comfort’ as well as sweet. Soup can be tailor-made to suit an endless variety of ethnic backgrounds depending on the choice of ingredients.

There is an egg ingredient format to suit any formulation specification.

“Many companies don’t realize that egg processors will customize ingredients to best meet their specific needs,” says Patricia Curtis, Ph.D., director and professor, National Egg Processing Center, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama. “Egg yolk and egg white can be mixed at the ratio to best fit their product formulation. Sugar, salt or other ingredients can be added to egg products to create a custom product that helps reduce the total number of separate

Hollandaise often use eggs as ingredients for well-rounded flavor. And in a frozen meal, eggs withstand the freeze/thaw/cook cycle and add body, flavor and color, vitally important components of proper meal presentation.

According to Glenn Froning, Ph.D., professor emeritus, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the industry is producing an enzyme modified yolk, converting the lecithin (phosphatidylcholine), to lysophosphatidylcholine to give it “superior emulsifying properties, for a thicker, smoother emulsion.”

Comfort foods transport a person to a place where life is simpler, less complicated and of course, simply delicious.

ingredients that must be measured out for a specific formulation.”

These additions can help boost eggs’ functional aspects. Added carbohydrate sweeteners enhance the whipping properties of dried eggs. Gums and starches improve texture and the freeze/thaw properties of precooked egg products. Ten percent added salt or sugar helps prevent excessive gelation in frozen whole egg ingredients. Fine sauces such as a



Hash Brown Quiche

Any dish with eggs as the prime ingredient will be filling and hearty and this quiche is no exception. Basic, familiar ingredients help keep costs low and the comfort food quotient high.



Eggs as ingredients help foam, whip, coagulate, emulsify and texturize, among other attributes. Aeration helps create fluffy cakes with great volume. When egg whites are beaten, the egg white increases in volume six to eight times and its foamy structure can withstand heat, which actually helps the air cells expand, and then the egg protein coagulate, maintaining this structure.

In angel cake, says Froning, the principal protein of egg white, ovalbumin, lends it volume. The globulins in the egg

of the product," says Sparks. "A proper Alfredo sauce gives you graininess from real Parmesan cheese and rounded flavor and color from the egg. In this case, the egg in formulation might not be a marketing tool, but the end product has that comfort level of tasting less processed, more like a chef-prepared sauce that you can eat in your own home."

Egg functionality is complemented by the fact that these ingredients are all natural and help maintain a clean label. Tate & Lyle reports⁷ consumers

other carbohydrates. This is true no matter what sort of environment the formulator should choose to use an egg ingredient, because the protein profile of an egg remains the same, an easily digestible form of amino acid that fills up and satisfies," says Greenblum.

Comfort foods that utilize the right ingredients can allow consumers and formulators alike to 'have their cake and eat it too,' in terms of calorie control, appearance, taste, texture and functionality.

"Comfort foods exemplify emotional eating," says Greenblum. "Egg ingredients provide nourishment and rich taste to most foods. You can have a portion controlled comfort food or individual serving size and have all the satisfaction without the guilt." ●

Foods with recognizable ingredients on the label are *in*.

white help lower surface tension, which makes it easier to beat and ovomucin helps stabilize the foam.

The coagulative properties of egg ingredients benefit not just the baking industry but meat industry as well. For consumers whose definition of comfort food equals fried chicken, the scales are balanced in favor of foods with breading that adheres well to the meat. Egg white ingredients' thermal gelling properties can help batter adhesion. In fact, the film-forming properties of egg white proteins help preserve a crispier coating by acting as a barrier between the coating and the food to prevent moisture migration.

And in comfort foods, that little extra zest is often added in the form of specialty mayonnaise or dressings, a smaller indulgence that fits inside even a tight food budget. Egg yolk products make excellent emulsifiers for suspending oil in mayonnaise and dressings.

Egg ingredients add richness and background flavor notes to prepared foods. Sparks says his company recently helped develop an Alfredo sauce for a customer that wanted a product a step above standard canned sauce. "In restaurants when they finish the sauce in the pan, they put an egg in there to enhance the richness

want 'simple' ingredients. "Foods with functional, recognizable ingredients on the label are in. Ingredients requiring an advanced degree in biochemistry to understand are out," according to Tate & Lyle. Sparks concurs, "Consumers respond well to ingredients that they can find in their own kitchen."

Comfort without guilt

The snack food arena introduced portion control packaging, and this concept has taken hold in the baking industry. This helps consumers indulge in a comfort food without maxing out caloric requirements for a day in one sitting.

This trend holds true not just for prepared foods but also for in-store bakeries, a bridge category between prepared foods and foodservice. A growing sub-category for in-store bakeries is individual desserts, with the national average for this category growing 28 percent in 2008 compared to 2007.⁸ The driver is consumers abandoning strict diets and indulging in moderation.

Ingredients that help build satiety into a comfort food formulation help create a satisfying, filling product. "Scientific studies prove that eggs contribute to satiety better than most

¹Comfort Food Consumption Varies with Gender Emotions, Says Study. Nov. 21, 2005. <<http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Financial-Industry/Comfort-food-consumption-varies-with-gender-emotions-says-study>>

²2009 Foods: A Side Dish of Recession." _Week-end Edition Sunday_. National Public Radio (NPR). 11 Jan. 2009. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99188114>>

³Auto Repair Industry Booming. More People Repair than Replace." Bakersfield News. KERO Bakersfield. Turnto23.com. 12 Mar. 2009. <<http://www.turnto23.com/news/18920556/detail.html>>

⁴Sloan, Elizabeth A. "The New Super Segments." Food Technology. January, 2009.

⁵Hume, Scott. "The Ten Minute Manager's Guide to...Driving Dessert Sales." Restaurants and Institutions. March 2009. <<http://www.rimag.com/article/CA6641697.html?industryid=48493>>

⁶In-Store Sales Tracker: Cakes Maintain In-Store Strength." Modern Baker. January 2009. <<http://www.perishablesgroup.com/dnn/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=frHxINKkKkHo%3D&tabid=4157>>

⁷The International Food Information Council (IFIC) 2008 Health and Wellness Survey. <<http://www.foodnavigator-usa.com/Financial-Industry/Tate-Lyle-identifies-top-food-trends-for-2009>>

⁸In-Store Sales Tracker: Cakes Maintain In-Store Strength." Modern Baker. January 2009. <<http://www.perishablesgroup.com/dnn/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=frHxINKkKkHo%3D&tabid=4157>>