



COMFORT FOOD: DEFINED

When life gives you lemons, just order pizza.

Back in 2019, we at Datassential designed HotShot Reports to capture new and emerging industry movements, like pet-friendly restaurants or NFTs & cryptocurrency. But sometimes, it's worth covering a topic like comfort food, which is often weaved into our daily eating habits but is rarely defined or closely examined.

So for our first HotShot Report of 2023, we sought to create a brief guide on comfort food. Which dishes and cuisines do consumers find most comforting? Do people seek comfort food when they're happy or sad? What qualities make comfort food special, and do these qualities change over time? Those are the core questions we wanted to investigate.

What we discovered, was somehow both surprising and not. Across all demographics, consumers are willing to indulge in comfort food very frequently, and for almost any occasion, special or otherwise. Most surprisingly, when choosing their comfort foods, consumers are far more driven by practical factors like taste than emotional factors like nostalgia. Comfort food, as we discover, isn't sacred or lavish; it's simple, cheap, often store-bought, and delicious. Indulging in comfort food is more often an immediate pleasure, instead of a journey into the past. Consumers' happy place, it turns out, lies squarely in their taste buds.

Datassential fielded this wave of research in January 2023 with 756 US consumers.

Most consumers weave their comfort foods into at least one meal a week, usually for dinner or as a late-night snack.

Among all generations, Gen Z are the likeliest to indulge in comfort food daily, as well as in earlier dayparts like breakfast and lunch.

IN GENERAL, HOW OFTEN WOULD YOU SAY YOU INDULGE IN COMFORT FOOD?



82%

indulge in comfort foods **FREQUENTLY**
(once a week or more)

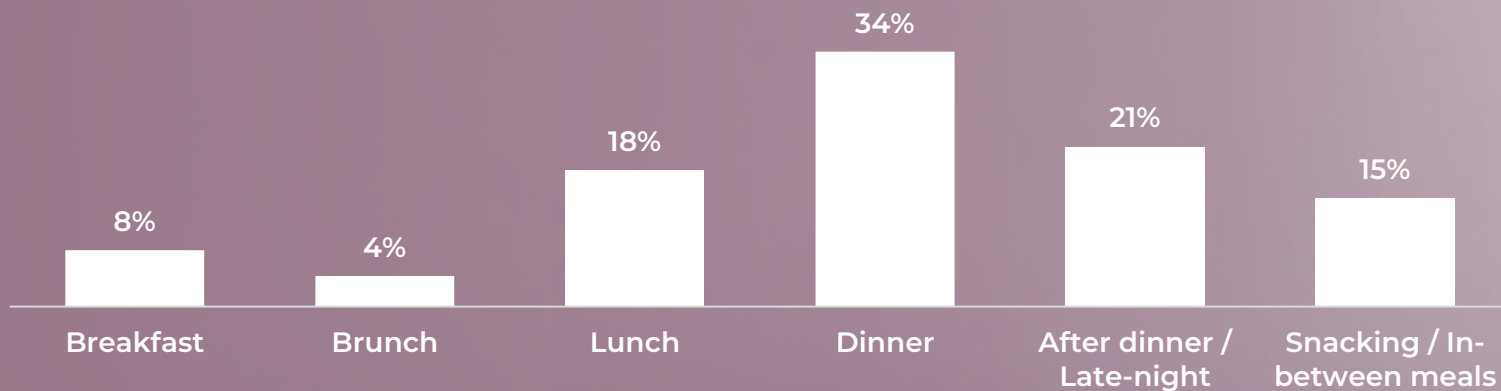
12%

indulge in comfort foods **MODERATELY**
(once a month or more)

5%

indulge in comfort foods **OCCASIONALLY**
(less than once a month)

IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DAYPARTS DO YOU EAT COMFORT FOOD MOST OFTEN?



Comfort food belongs in any dining occasion, even without a distinct emotional need.

Women (41%), Gen Z (44%), and Millennials (37%) are more likely to rely on comfort food to soothe emotional distress than men (26%) and Boomers (21%).

IN WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING OCCASIONS DO YOU TEND TO SEEK OUT COMFORT FOOD?

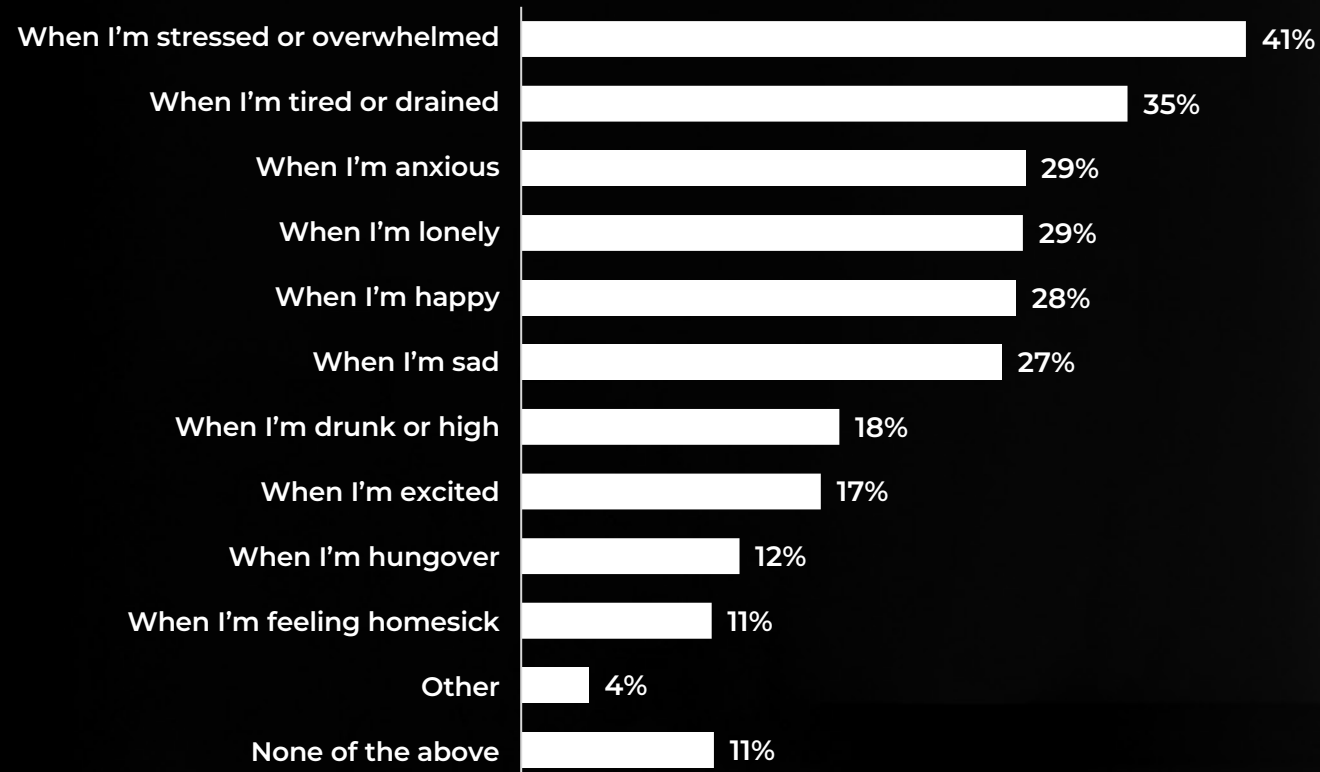
A regular weekday meal	34%
A regular weekend meal	33%
During a moment of emotional distress	33%
Family meal /gathering	33%
While watching an event (sports, movie, etc.)	33%
During the holidays or while on vacation	33%
To celebrate a special occasion (birthday, etc.)	28%
Casual socializing	28%
To celebrate a special achievement (promotion, etc.)	19%
Romantic meal or occasion	15%
Other	2%
None of the above	4%



Negative emotions like stress, exhaustion, and anxiety often motivate consumers to seek out their favorite comforting dishes.

That said, happiness and excitement are just as powerful at driving comfort food consumption as sadness and anxiety, especially among women and younger generations.

DURING WHICH OF THESE EMOTIONAL STATES DO YOU TYPICALLY FIND YOURSELF SEEKING OUT COMFORT FOOD THE MOST?



For most consumers, food doesn't have to be lavish or complex to be comforting.

When in need, nearly 60% of consumers would rather grab a quick snack than a full meal, and over half would be fine with takeout instead of a home-cooked meal. Although half of Gen Z & Millennials are willing to splurge on comfort food, two in three Boomers are committed to budget-friendly options.



WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS DO YOU AGREE WITH MORE?

“When I’m in the mood for comfort food, I usually crave...”

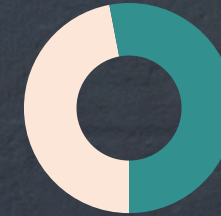
57%
Small snacks & drinks



43%
Full meals & main dishes

“For me, the best comfort foods can only be...”

47%
Home-made



53%
Store-bought or prepared by a restaurant

“When it comes to purchasing comfort foods, I usually...”

56%
Don't need to exceed my regular budget



44%
Am willing to splurge on foods that make me happy

Consumers may not be able to predict *when* they need comfort food, but *what* food they find comforting rarely changes.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS DO YOU AGREE WITH MORE?

“My go-to comfort foods ...”

55%

Remain the same all year round



45%

Usually depend on the season

56%

Have been the same all my life



46%

Have changed as I got older

“These days, I feel like...”

38%

I can predict when I will need comfort food



62%

My comfort food cravings are unpredictable

35%

I crave comfort food more than pre-COVID



65%

I seek out comfort food just as often

Even in the realm of comfort food, taste and practicality still triumph over nostalgia or emotional attachments.

On average, Boomers care more deeply about practical factors like taste or price, while Millennials are more likely to value indulgence and healthfulness. Only a quarter of consumers need their comfort foods to evoke nostalgia or rekindle childhood memories.

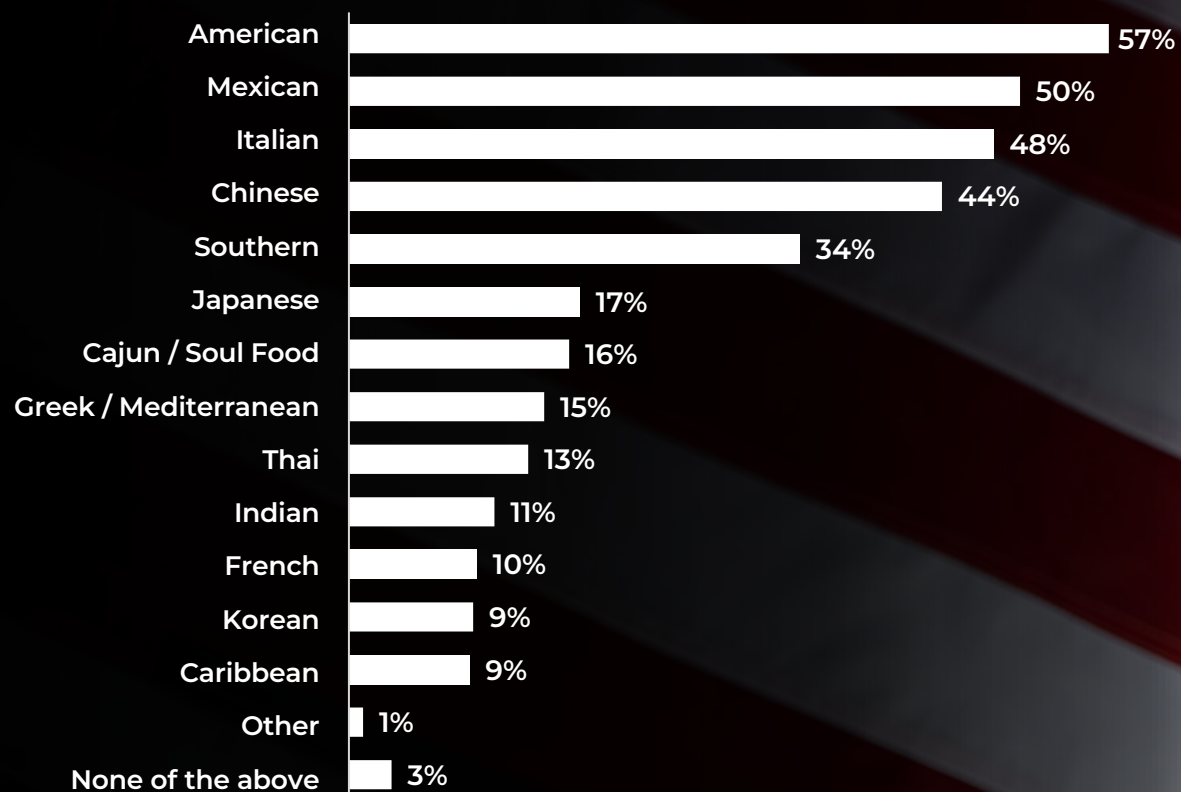
WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES OR ATTRIBUTES DO YOU FIND MOST IMPORTANT IN YOUR GO-TO COMFORT FOOD?



Most U.S. consumers find American food comforting, in addition to the global cuisines that may match their culture or ethnicity.

Millennials and Gen Z are more likely than older generations to find comfort when eating Mexican, Japanese, and Korean cuisines.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING CUISINES FEEL MOST COMFORTING TO YOU?



In line with previous findings, the most popular comfort foods tend to be decadent, inexpensive, and widely accessible, like pizza, cookies, or fries.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING MEALS OR SNACKS WOULD YOU CONSIDER SOME OF YOUR GO-TO COMFORT FOODS?

Full Meals & Main Dishes

Pizza	55%
French fries	45%
Burgers	44%
Pasta	39%
Fried fast foods (chicken nuggets, etc.)	38%
Tacos	37%
Sandwiches & grilled cheese	34%
Chicken wings	32%
Breakfast foods (pancakes, waffles, etc.)	31%
Casseroles / Mac n' cheese	30%
Steak or other main entrées	27%
Barbecue / ribs	25%
Soups & salads	22%
Sushi	15%
Other	6%
None of the above	2%

Snacks & Beverages

Cookies, brownies, and other desserts	55%
Ice cream / milkshakes	54%
Chips	50%
Chocolate or candy	48%
Pastries and baked goods	43%
Soft drinks	42%
Cheese	36%
Coffee or tea	30%
Cereal	25%
Raw fruits and vegetables	22%
Smoothies or juices	21%
Alcoholic beverages	21%
Jerky and cured meats	21%
Other	1%
None of the above	2%



Two-thirds of consumers feel guilty indulging in comfort food, but most have a way to feel better about it.

Over a third of Gen Z and Millennials always associate comfort foods with guilt, while two in five men and Boomers have no reservations about them.

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED GUILT AFTER EATING COMFORT FOOD?



28%

ALWAYS FEEL GUILTY, but indulge anyway

37%

SOMETIMES FEEL GUILTY, depends on the occasion

35%

NEVER FEEL GUILTY about eating comfort food

WHENEVER YOU FEEL GUILTY AFTER INDULGING IN COMFORT FOOD, HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY ALLEVIATE THAT GUILT?

Eat a healthy meal the next day to balance out the comfort food	33%
Exercise more to “make up” for the indulgent meal	18%
Schedule comfort meals on a “cheat” day	16%
Sneak a healthy component into comfort meal (pizza with a side salad, etc.)	11%
Other	2%
Feel guilty about indulging, but don't do anything about it	20%



a story in numbers:

COMFORT FOOD: DEFINED

82%

Over 80% of consumers indulge in comfort food at least once a week, if not more.

Most tend to enjoy their comfort foods for dinner or as late-night snacks, though Gen Z are more likely to indulge during breakfast or lunch hours.

1 in 3

One in three consumers would enjoy comfort food as regular meals, even without an emotional need.

In moments when comfort food is tied to an emotional state, stress is most often the driving factor, though happiness is just as powerful a motivator as sadness.

71%

Three in four consumers believe taste is the most important quality for comfort food, followed by price.

Consumers' preferred comfort foods are simple, decadent, and they rarely change. When in need, most are more likely to reach for storebought cookies or order pizza instead of preparing a home-cooked meal.

2 in 3

Two in three consumers tend to associate comfort food with some form of guilty pleasure.

And when they do feel guilty, 80% of consumers attempt to balance out their indulgence, usually by eating more healthfully or exercising harder the next day.