

TOP 10 TRENDS FOR 2016

New Comfort Bases

Comfort bases get culinary upgrades in hashes, chilaquiles and savory porridges

By Katie Ayoub

Comfort food is often defined by its ties to the past, inviting warmth and satisfaction channeled through the rosy mists of time. Tinkering with those comfort food classics is almost a must in foodservice—delivering nostalgia, but dialing up the flavor experience. The challenge is finding new ways to surprise and delight diners while keeping the moniker of comfort food intact.

“Changing demographics, regional/ethnic exposure, experience and culinary creativity have shifted both our definitions and desires around comfort food. Mashed up flavors and formats are a good way to introduce an unfamiliar or unexpected element with the more comforting or conventional, which makes the whole dish more approachable and exciting.” - Robin Schempp

We’re calling out three bases that give today’s diners what they love and crave about comfort food. First, hashes are breaking from tradition, gliding across dayparts effortlessly and presenting updated flavor profiles in the build. As evidence, look to the Shishito Hash at Sqirl in Los Angeles, with roasted fingerling potatoes, red onion, shishito, charred pepper salsa and fried egg. Second, chilaquiles are breaking out of Mexican-themed restaurants and finding welcoming homes on eclectic brunch, all-day and late-night menus. Longfellow Grill, a diner in Minneapolis, serves chilaquiles loaded with eggs, chorizo, chiles, pico de gallo, queso fresco, black bean purée and lime sour cream. Third, congees are landing on breakfast and brunch menus, showcasing the homey warmth of savory rice porridge. At the University of Massachusetts, students flock to a congee breakfast bar, customizing with toppings like peanuts, spring onions and crispy dried shallots. All three of these bases are rich with opportunity, checking the important boxes of flavor innovation and, of course, comfort. They’re also endlessly adaptable, answering the call for menu items that can morph into any daypart, an important attribute in this modern landscape of blurred boundaries.



Dishes like these chilaquiles with pork belly prove the craveability of global comfort foods.

“It’s interesting to note that all three of these bases are breakfast items, reflecting the increasing innovation and global influence on the breakfast and brunch menu,” says Brian Darr, managing director at Datassential. “Bases are also important to the farm-to-table movement because a kitchen can constantly update them with whatever fresh vegetables are in season.” Seasonality, as well as the new veg-centric trend, are both helping to propel these bases forward, opening up the possibility of vegetable add-ins beyond the tried and true. The time is right for these three versatile bases—driven by a more globally aware consumer, a collective hankering for flavor adventure, and a never-ending quest for comfort.

“Classic comfort bases can span all dayparts as consumers define what they want to eat by their taste of the moment rather than the traditional time of day. This trend allows operators to be creative with items that are already in their pantries to create flavorful new renditions of classic comfort food.” - Sharon Olson

HASH IT OUT



First Watch experiments with innovative hash combinations, including this Harvest Hash, an LTO with roasted sweet potatoes, sausage, roasted zucchini and shallots.

Perhaps the easiest of the three to leverage, hash is familiar to most customers, traditionally served at breakfast with a base of potatoes topped with a combination of cheese, vegetables and eggs. First Watch has always served hash in one iteration or another. “They have gone by different names, but they’re essentially the same dish—skillets, skillet hashes, hashes—and they have always done really well for us,” says Shane Schaibly, corporate chef of this 100-plus unit breakfast concept. “It’s a great platform to introduce different proteins using a familiar base dish that customers seem to connect with and feel safe ordering.” Last summer, First Watch ran a successful LTO called Smoked Brisket Hash: seasoned potatoes, smoked beef brisket, fresh garlic, roasted kale, roasted onion, cage-free eggs any style, finished with maple barbecue sauce. Other LTOs include the Resolution Hash, featuring turkey sausage, house-roasted crimini mushrooms, onions and tomatoes with herbed goat cheese and hollandaise, and the Harvest Hash with roasted sweet potatoes, sausage, roasted zucchini and shallots.

Hash Chicago, not surprisingly, serves a number of hashes. What’s interesting is how they hang their whole concept on the hash, changing up the build but keeping it firmly within the comfort food zone. Examples include a Pork Bubble & Squeak with pork shoulder, sweet potatoes, Brussels sprouts and mustard cream sauce. At Pinewood Social in Nashville, the Pot Roast Hash sees beef, potato, peppers and a sunny-side-up egg. Diners at 24 Diner in Austin, Texas, can choose from four hashes, all starring house-cut Idaho Burbank potatoes mixed with onions, jalapeños and set with two runny eggs.

Hashes are not confined by potatoes, illustrating the true versatility of this platform. Other root vegetables — carrots, beets, parsnips—and hearty items like Brussels sprouts, squash and beans are on-trend hash carriers. At Balena in Chicago, a crispy polenta hash is topped with pork ragù, served at brunch. Back at Hash, diners can order the Chickpea Hash with spicy chickpeas, yogurt, crispy kale and paneer. “As a comfort food carrier, hash is like a chameleon, ready to change flavor, color and direction at a moment’s notice,” says Christopher Koetke of Kendall College School of Culinary Arts/Laureate International Universities.. “While often thought of as a breakfast dish, hash has potential for all dayparts. Other starchy ingredients, like plantains, yucca and root vegetables, could replace all or a portion of the potatoes to take the hash in a new direction.”

“Whether it’s a bowl of noodles, a signature porridge or cheddar grits, customers are benefitting from this new range of tasty regional and cultural comfort foods. Best of all is the ease with which these bases can be customized and flavored. Incorporating local flavor into a global comfort food is a means to creating a signature product.” - Mike Buononato

CHAMPIONING CHILAQUILES

We’ve seen a deeper exploration of Mexican flavors at the breakfast daypart with breakfast burritos and even tacos more common than ever. The next frontier here belongs to chilaquiles. They have the comfort food thing locked up: fried corn tortillas simmered with green or red sauce or salsa, topped with pulled chicken or pork, avocado, queso fresco, crema and fried eggs. Basically, they’re breakfast nachos, and who could say no



to that? Driven by the brunch trend, they also wrap up deeply satisfying, adventurous flavor and texture. And like other trends with Mexican dishes and ingredients, chilaquiles are thriving outside of their native environment. Selden Standard in Detroit, which serves traditional fare like lemon ricotta pancakes, also menus chilaquiles (tomatillo, black beans and fried eggs). At Marmalade in Chicago, Vegan Chilaquiles sport an organic tofu scramble with yellow onions, baby spinach, red and green peppers and spicy chilaquiles tossed in Mayan sauce or salsa verde. Down the road at The Bristol, the brunch menu features braised pork chilaquiles with fried egg, lime, cilantro and queso fresco. And Bassett Street Brunch Club in Madison, Wis., cuts right to the chase, serving Breakfast Nachos: corn tortilla chips topped with braised chicken, guajillo chile sauce, crumbled queso fresco, avocado, jalapeños, cilantro, radishes and two eggs over easy.

Chef/Owner Ray Tang says his Mission Chilaquiles at Presidio Social Club in San Francisco are the only non-American comfort food he serves at the restaurant’s

weekend brunch. “Tart, spicy, salty, saucy and satisfying. What’s not to love about this most unsung dish?” he says. His features green chiles, tomatillo and jalapeño, and has starred various proteins, including shrimp and crispy pork belly. “The potential for growth is that the entire dish is extremely cost effective,” says Tang. “Chilaquiles by nature are an extremely satisfying plate of goodness that anyone can relate to.”

To illustrate the genius swap factor between hashes and chilaquiles, consider how readily interchangeable the ingredients are: Sub potatoes for tortilla strips or vice versa. Either works beautifully. In fact, at Hash Chicago, the chilaquiles are listed as a hash, sporting stewed tortilla, black bean, tomato, jalapeño and Chihuahua cheese, served with sour cream and salsa verde. “It is yet another example of how Mexican food is not only pervasive in its traditional form, but how it has been adopted into the American culinary stew,” says Koetke. “As America adopts this comfort food, it will also make chilaquiles its own by playing with it—substituting ingredients, serving it at all dayparts. It has all the necessary components—fat, crunch, spice, cheese—to be widely loved in any form that it takes over time.”

EVERYBODY DO THE CONGEE



Congee bases include brown rice and grits, while toppings range from savory to sweet at Brooklyn Porridge Co., a New York pop-up transitioning to a permanent concept.

Congee speaks to the more adventurous comfort-food seekers. Explained best as an Asian risotto, this soothing rice porridge, most often eaten at breakfast in China and other parts of Asia, is centered on a base of soft, creamy, often soupy, white rice that’s been cooked in some sort of savory broth. The magic for today’s consumer lies in its add-ins, like braised pork belly, soft-cooked eggs or stewed apples.

In the world of foodservice, congee flutters on the fringe, appearing in porridge pop-ups like Porridge and Puffs in Los Angeles and Brooklyn Porridge Co., both transitioning to permanent concepts. But the potential for growth should be noted; for the college and university segment driven by Millennials and Gen Z, congee is a sought-after comfort food. Ken Toong, executive director of auxiliary enterprises for University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Mass., reports that he sells more than 500 portions a day. Students choose between a plain or meat-flavored rice base with a self-serve selection of five toppings, such as spring onion, peanuts, Chinese crullers and cilantro.

“Congee is gaining popularity, and to many of our Asian students, it is their comfort food,” he says. “I think it is the next big thing for breakfast as our student population is getting more diverse.”

At Brooklyn Porridge Co., a seasonal pop-up in Brooklyn, brown rice congee is one of the bases offered on its porridge menu. Karyn Seltzer, owner and co-creator, reports that the most popular savory build includes small-batch kimchi, edamame, honey-Sriracha and sunflower satay (butter made with coconut oil and coconut milk). “What we’re doing here is showing that you can combine healthy food with comfort food and make it taste delicious,” she says. Her congee is a blend of brown rice with millet, a bit of salt and pepper, and turmeric. At Porridge and Puffs, diners can choose from big bowls of congee or opt for a flight of three smaller bowls, perhaps flavored with braised short rib, pickled pear and fermented mustard greens.

Little Sister in Los Angeles serves congee with proteins like duck confit or poached chicken, usually with cilantro, scallion, fried shallots and Chinese crullers. “Congee is a nostalgic dish for me,” says Chef Tin Vuong. “It’s hearty and savory. I grew up eating it in the morning, as well as late-night. It’s the epitome of home-cooked soul food.”

The Appeal of New Comfort Bases

by Rob Corliss

Comfort bases have been blowing up. From food trucks to global street foods, chef-driven applications have enticed consumer palates. Chefs are continuing to drive this conversation, bringing exciting creativity to new features like porridges, hashes, chilaquiles and even broth bowls.

Comfort-based offerings provide big revenue opportunities for restaurants. They have the ability to be featured as lower-cost or premium-value menu items. Simplified food with minimal ingredient lists and minimal preparations always resonates with both chefs and consumers. The less-is-more theory relies on quality ingredients, professional culinary techniques and the sentimental, nostalgic connection these foods conjure, and comfort foods inherently correlate to craveability and emotions.

Savory Porridge Potential

by Christopher Koetke

While sweetened porridge seems to represent the bulk of porridge consumption in the United States, especially at breakfast, it is interesting to note the global importance of savory porridge in the role of many subsistence diets. Indeed, it is not that far back that many here in the United States relied

on grits or cornmeal mush as part of a low-budget diet.

There is a huge opportunity for porridges like oats (especially steel-cut), millet, barley and buckwheat to gain a stronger foothold as a savory porridge. This builds on their growing acceptance as grain dishes—but in a more liquid and comforting state. Other more exotic and heirloom grains could also follow suit.

Porridges have the potential to be flavored in a myriad ways and even garnished with chunks of proteins, vegetables or fruits. The opportunities for interesting savory variations are much larger than what is possible in the sweet realm.

New Comfort Basics

by Annie Culver, The Culinary Edge

Comfort food will always be exactly that. Warm, homey, often simple-flavored meals have stood the test of time, with many revamped to appeal to the modern consumer. Even the most health-conscious and yoga-practicing 20-somethings are willing to succumb to the most indulgent of cravings—if they see the artisan or experiential value of a meal, that is.

Trends tend to ebb and flow from cutting-edge innovation back to the old classics. We are always looking for the next best thing, while nodding to the trends of our pasts. Comfort food defines this—and it is all about positioning it to appeal to Millennials.