

Reflection: Finding Comfort and Discomfort Through Foodways During the Covid-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

When the covid-19 pandemic was recognized as a potential public health threat in the U.S. in early March of 2020, one of the responses was a turn towards comfort food. Food media began trying to calm those fears by publishing recipes, and the popularity of discussions on social media suggested that the concept struck a chord (Pellacio 2020). It seems logical that it would. In her seminal article on comfort food, medical sociologist Julie Locher characterized comfort food as food consumed during periods of stress (2002). The Covid-19 pandemic is definitely a time a stress, so it comes as no surprise that Americans would turn to comfort foods.¹

Popular conceptions of comfort food, however, are problematic. The idea assumes privilege in having choices around food consumption and the opportunity approach food for emotional rather than nutritional needs. Many of the published recipes called for specialized or expensive ingredients, or having the time and energy to take pleasure in cooking. Moreover, items marketed as “comfort foods” tend to reflect an invented, idealized, “all American” past of childhoods nurtured by home cooking (Long 2017). Those dishes are not relevant to everyone’s own experiences, identities, values, nor tastes (Georgis 2020).

It was also obvious that the pandemic was causing a great deal of anxiety in the activities surrounding food, in the foodways practices of producing, procuring, preserving, preparing, presenting, consuming, and disposing of food (Severenson 2020). These discomforts highlighted disparities in the contemporary food system as well as in society at large and reflected individual circumstances and identities. At the same time, people seemed to be finding unexpected opportunities for comfort by creatively addressing those concerns.

The Center for Food and Culture began documenting these responses, conducting over sixty interviews between May and September, 2020. These were used for an on-line exhibit and virtual symposium. Both are available along with other resources on public free website.² This reflection offers thoughts on the findings from that project.

DISCOMFORTS AND COMFORTS THROUGH FOODWAYS

While people enjoyed describing dishes they considered to be their own “comfort food,” the various foodways activities elicited more reflection on how they were finding comfort or discomfort. Although we asked about each component in foodways,³ the activities that seemed to be the most problematic were procuring food, preserving or storing it once it is obtained, preparing meals, and socializing around food consumption.

When lock-downs first started in the U.S. in late February and March of 2020, grocery stores were exempt and remained open. People had to eat, and most had to shop

at stores for their food. Very little was known about the virus at this point, and scientific data on whether surfaces and food packaging were safe was not yet available.

Discussions about how to handle shopping bags and produce were rampant. People talked about leaving groceries to sit for a day before they unpacked them, or wearing gloves while they unpacked and sanitized each item before putting it away. Ordering food online for either delivery or pick-up was one solution. People then posted about funny and annoying mistakes made in those orders: one carrot instead of one bag; five 10-pound bags of potatoes instead of five pounds; canned salmon instead of fresh.

Also, people began consolidating their shopping with friends, neighbors, or family. It was common for one person to take orders, go to the store, then deliver the items, oftentimes leaving bags on doorsteps to minimize physical contact. Along with these “visits” being a welcome respite from the isolation many of us were experiencing, they affirmed a social network and strengthened a sense of connectedness with individuals who were already friends.

Cautiousness around entering supermarkets as well as concerns about the viability of the food system during the pandemic also seemed to cause people to think about producing their own food. Backyard chickens and bees became popular topics on social media, and discussions of gardening became more serious, perhaps a survival necessity rather than a pleasant recreation. At the same time, people spoke of how digging in the dirt, watching seeds grow, and watching the weather gave them a sense of connection to the seasons and to the earth. Gardening was not only giving them enough zucchini to last through the upcoming year, it literally and emotionally grounded them in nature and in cycles larger than human ones being affected by the pandemic.

A major source of discomfort was the shortages of some ingredients in the early weeks of the pandemic. Pasta, beef, yeast, and flour, for example, sold out in mainstream supermarkets. (Severson and Moskin 2020), reflecting their place as staples in mainstream American diets.⁴ The unavailability of certain items meant that some recipes could not be followed, and cooks needed to either find a different recipe or find substitutes. While this could be frustrating for some, it also forced a certain amount of creativity and imagination that cooks had perhaps previously not felt free to exercise. People told of substitutions that worked and failed and shared suggestions for recipes, and there seemed to be a newfound freedom in being “released” from recipes. In one example, the lack of yeast led to the sharing among friends of a sourdough starter. The resulting breads were personalized to individual circumstances, including one made out of rye for someone with gluten sensitivities, and then shared at outdoor, socially distanced gatherings.

Storing of food items was another area of discomfort as well as possible comfort. Refrigerators, freezers, cupboards, and pantries could only hold so much, and many people, particularly those living in cities or in apartments, had limited space. Those with second refrigerators and basements began purchasing food in larger quantities to save for

the future. These stores of food gave a sense of security and comfort, but there was also a discomfort in not knowing exactly what items were there and still good. One of the first things some individuals did was to take an inventory of their food, making notes of what meals could be made and how long the supplies could last before needing to be restocked. Organizing these spaces gave a sense of order in the midst of the chaos created by the pandemic and allowed a sense of control over the uncertainties of future availability.

The need to preserve food also led to an apparent surge of interest in canning and other methods of preservation. Numerous recipes for making pickles and jams circulated on the Internet, and by the end of the summer, canning lids were difficult to obtain. Some then turned to drying and freezing produce. These activities had practical ends, but they also gave individuals a sense of control and order. Also, a popular meme pointedly observed that “old-fashioned” skills are now appreciated, an observation that seemed to offer comfort tinged with revenge for those who felt their homemaking skills had been belittled by modern life.

Another result of the uncertainty about supplies was that some people began rationing their food, allotting certain ingredients and amounts for particular meals. One individual now preparing meals three times a day for a family of four began carefully planning those meals with stocks of ingredients in mind. To keep children (and spouse) from raiding the supplies, she kept a box in the cupboard and in the refrigerator of available snacks. Also, like many, she began making more careful use of leftovers, planning meals around them or incorporating them into other dishes. While the uncertainty of future availability of food was stressful, she noted finding comfort in the feeling of control over those supplies. Similarly, at least one person pointed out that the need to ration their food led to their losing weight, a small but comforting “silver lining” to the pandemic.

Food preparation, in general, took on a much larger role in many people’s lives than before the pandemic. Some were discouraged by their lack of culinary skill and the disappointing results of their efforts, while others were inspired to develop those skills and try new recipes. However, even some individuals who usually enjoyed cooking found it taxing to constantly have to cook. The sudden routineness of such food preparation made it feel like an obligation rather than a domain of artistry and imagination. Others felt that it actually helped provide structure to days that now seemed shapeless and endless, although the tedium of constantly cleaning up offset the comfort for at least one person.

For some, food preparation provided comfort by offering an arena in which they could find a sense of purpose and achievement. Cooking offered control over the process of creation from start to finish and an intimate knowledge of the ingredients in a dish and the amount of labor required to prepare it. The fruits of that labor were a tangible reminder of their own efficacy, something that was in question during the pandemic. This might partially explain the surge of popularity in bread making. The high number of

social media posts showing the resulting loaves suggests that the satisfaction of producing that bread provided comfort for many people.

One of the most obvious areas of discomfort was that of socializing around food. The sharing of meals is oftentimes an excuse for gathering as well as an accompaniment to and source of conversation and interaction at events. Restaurants and bars were some of the first venues to close, and many people were left without places to gather. Even meals in private homes called for caution. A number of creative strategies for sharing food and drink developed—virtual happy hours, “quarantinis,” birthday parties, and meals; outdoor gatherings where friends bring their own food and maintain “social distance.” Similarly, people told of virtual commensality by cooking the same dish at the same time as friends, using a recipe given by a family member, or watching the same youtube video to learn how to make a dish. These strategies helped ease the loneliness and isolation many were experiencing. Finding comfort in these virtual encounters, some people have commented that they plan to continue them in the future.

DISCUSSION

Several themes appeared in these interviews and social media postings. Some people did find comfort in specific dishes that they felt relieved stress caused by the pandemic. These were not necessarily the foods usually thought of as comfort foods—those representing our childhood, “snack” foods and desserts laden with fat, sugar, or salt, or iconic dishes from cuisines popularly considered “comforting” (southern, Jewish, African-American). They were primarily dishes that evoked positive memories of other people, places, and events, as well as their own particular pasts.

More significantly, comfort—as well as discomfort--was derived from the various activities around foodways. These activities, while potentially a source of discomfort, also provided opportunities to recognize, celebrate, and create a sense of connectedness with other people that was then comforting. That connectedness could include nature, history, and larger ideals. Through these activities, individuals were able to feel a sense of control over at least one segment of life, whether that was making their freezer orderly or knowing how many meals could be prepared from what was on hand. This control also gave a sense of efficacy or agency, that they could produce a desired result. Successfully baking a loaf of bread was about much more than simply producing bread; it proved that that individual could still act upon the world, could have some say in what transpired. For some, that agency was then extended to providing assistance to other people. Shopping for an elderly neighbor, for example, might provide needed supplies, but it also made the shopper feel that they had achieved something that mattered. A number of interviewees said they found comfort in taking active roles in their communities. Ordering takeout from restaurants that they knew were struggling became a regular activity and a significant source of comfort. One participant discussed how her family planned to order once a week from a restaurant that they knew would be struggling, as a deliberate way to

aid other people who were facing serious consequences from the pandemic. Helping in these ways gave a sense of significance in that they could make a difference. By comforting other people, they comforted themselves.

Furthermore, these comforts speak to larger issues of equity and justice. Not everyone has the emotional energy, economic resources, culinary knowledge, or access to ingredients or tools to find comfort in foodways activities. Systemic discrimination excludes certain groups or places obstacles in their way—even the very voices that were included in this oral history reflected certain privileges shaping time, energy, and motivation to participate. More research is called for to determine how different identities shape the ways in which individuals were finding comfort or discomfort through foodways, but two points stood out. The very presence of choice itself was a source of comfort, and that presence was related to the specific circumstances in which individuals were living during the pandemic. Those contexts were shaped by larger social factors and identities--race, class, gender, abilities, age, occupation, age, as well as personal tastes and food sensitivities.

IMPLICATIONS

These observations suggest a number of thoughts about comfort food. First, the popular, and possibly scholarly, conceptions of comfort food are too limited. We need to recognize that the category is a dynamic, dialectical one that includes within it the possibility of its opposite. Also, it represents an ethos that reflects a particular social history, and that history has frequently denied comfort to individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, abilities, and other identities. While this project was not able to examine these factors closely, it was clear that individual circumstances and identities were significant factors in whether people were able to find comfort through foodways.

Similarly, the focus on comfort food as specific dishes ignores the nature of food as a series of processes in a multifaceted domain that is intertwined with every other domain of culture. Comfort as well as discomfort can be found in those other activities, shaping the meanings attached to the food itself. Foodways encourages recognition of the larger food system, the institutions and networks involved in producing food and getting it to consumers. It then enables us to see how disruptions in that larger system are connected to individuals' experiences of discomfort and comfort. Our food culture reflects the disparities and inequalities that exist within our current food system and within our culture in general. Recognizing the potential for discomfort acknowledges those realities.

The idea of comfort, itself, could also be expanded. Researchers previously identified specific needs fulfilled by comfort foods: nostalgia, convenience, physical comfort, indulgence (Locher 2002; Locher, et al. 2005) and belonging (Troisi and Gabriel

2011; Gabriel, et al. 2016). The stresses caused by the pandemic are not routine ones to be easily eased; they are concerns of a more existential nature about the uncertainty of the future, the lack of control we as individuals seem to have about our own wellbeing as well as that of the world, and the meanings of lives spent in isolation or overwhelmed with work, worries, and fears. Foodways that comfort can speak to these deeper anxieties by fulfilling needs for control, efficacy, agency, significance, and connectedness.

Finally, this time of the pandemic--what a friend has called “the coroniverse” (Giblin 2020)—can be seen as one of liminality, a period in between two stages in a rite of passage (Falassi, 1986; Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960).⁵ We have left behind an earlier stage with its established rules and will move eventually to a post-pandemic world. In the meantime, the old rules no longer apply, but we do not yet know the new ones. Comfort foodways, in which the normal guidelines for eating are suspended, can serve as a medium through which individuals are playing with a potential new order. Will calories still count; will sugar still make us “hyper;” will carbohydrates still translate into pounds on our hips? This liminality in itself is oftentimes stressful, but it also offers the potential to develop new relationships with food. Foodways activities that were previously routine chores are now recognized as providing opportunities for participation in larger social networks as well as for performing of identities, values, and relationships. The mundane routines of our everyday foods are now appreciated as meaningful reflections of our survival and as potent moments for aesthetic expression and engagement. The disruptions to those routines caused by the pandemic can also make us aware of the connectedness of our own culinary experiences to the larger food system and the comforts-discomforts of others. Comfort food, as thought of now, tends to be about the wellbeing of the individual. Can we expand comfort foodways to take into account how the individual interacts with and impacts the larger food system and social system? Perhaps these new relationships will be permanent, encouraging us to not only find comfort in all food and foodways, but to work to offer those opportunities to others as well.

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¹ The phrase “comfort food” comes originally out of psychology, but American food industries and food media have constructed the category as foodstuffs that are generally thought of as tasty but lacking nutritional benefits (Jones 2017; Jones and Long 2017, Long 2017). These “bad” foods (Biltekoff 2013, Jones 2017, Rozin 1998) are “allowed” when an individual feels stressed or emotionally depleted, suspending the usual rules for healthy and moral eating. The concept resonated with the American public, which seemed to welcome a respite from the moralistic associations with pleasurable food. More studies include Gabriel (2016), Ong (2015), Romm (2008), Stein (2008), Troisi (2011), Wansick (2003).

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³ The concept of foodways is used in folkloristics as both a theory and a method. See Long 2015.

⁵ I also used this concept to examine emotional eating during the pandemic (Shen 2020).