



**STATE OF
THE PLATE**

Comfort Food's Contemporary Comeback

ESSAY BY
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Texas comfort foods come in an amazing array of flavors. They also trigger a wide range of emotions. From the first bite of mom's banana pudding with Nilla wafers at the family reunion to the welcome-home twang of cheese enchiladas in chili gravy after a trip out of state, Texas comfort food speaks to your soul.

Thanksgiving is not Thanksgiving without your particular comfort-food favorites. We might agree about some of them, like the church lady's homemade tamales. And we get into family feuds over others, like saltines spread with *parisa* (Texan steak *tartare*) and those green beans with the cream of mushroom soup and canned onions. To each his own, as the saying goes.

And of course, there are those who dismiss the entire category of comfort food as unworthy of all the attention it gets. Some chefs in cutting-edge restaurants mockingly refer to such standards as cheese grits and mashed potatoes with gravy as "glorified baby food." But other eateries, like Frank's Americana Revival in Houston, have made comfort-food classics like chicken pot pie and chicken-fried steak the stars of the menu—only they are serving them with crunchy just-picked green beans, heirloom tomato salads, and hand-cut French fries.

Since I moved to Galveston last spring, seafood has surged to the top of my comfort-food hit parade. Fried shrimp, or fish simply cooked on the grill or under the broiler, brings back memories of beach vacations and summer—it's often the sauce that makes the fish dish exciting. I still don't have the secret recipe for that incredible tartar sauce at King's Inn on Baffin Bay, but I keep getting closer. (For tartar sauce ideas, see texashighways.com/recipes-sides-sauces for the first two recipes in my cookbook *Texas Eats*.) I also like chef Bryan Caswell's Sriracha remoulade on crab cakes at Reef restaurant in Houston, and I love his idea of adding lime pickle to the Asiago bread crumbs on baked oysters—an exciting new spin on classic Oysters Rockefeller.

The popularity of the Americana music movement has encouraged the rise of an Americana food movement, too. Just as bands like Alabama Shakes and the Carolina Chocolate Drops are

creating a modern version of rhythm-and-blues and country music, young chefs in new Texas restaurants are updating heritage food classics and turning them into exciting contemporary dishes. The Taleggio and aged cheddar mac and cheese at Hillside Pharmacy in Austin, the coffee-cured barbecued brisket with roasted peppers at Smoke in Dallas, and the chicken wings with anchovies and wildflower honey at Pax Americana in Houston are all excellent examples.

As Texas becomes ever more multicultural, we are making room on our Thanksgiving tables (and our Black Friday leftover spreads) for newly familiar items that are becoming a part of our comfort food repertoire. Don't be surprised if you find turkey *mole*, Vietnamese turkey *pho*, or Anglo-Indian turkey curry on the menu this year. (Cranberry sauce is a great stand-in for chutney.)

In truth, comfort food has never been more popular in Texas, and Texas comfort foods have never been more widely admired in the rest of the country. Several Tex-Mex restaurants opened in New York this year, and Hill Country Chicken, a restaurant for those who crave Texas yardbird in the Big Apple, has expanded to two locations.

Austin pitmaster Aaron Franklin's version of Texas barbecue is now being imitated on both coasts. When Franklin won the James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southwest last spring, it was the first time a barbecue pitman had ever received such acclaim. The Beard award is usually reserved for chefs in the very top

echelon of fine dining restaurants, so the choice of Aaron Franklin by the Beard awards committee signaled a new respect for Texas barbecue as a culinary art form.

Franklin's is one of a new breed of "stand in line" joints that are raising the bar on barbecue in urban areas around the state. They are smoking a higher grade of brisket and seasoning the well-trimmed fat cap to create a spicy black bark that makes each bite crunchy. The long lines may be annoying, but they assure that every slice of brisket is fresh off the smoker. Killen's Barbecue in Pearland, CorkScrew BBQ, which just moved to a new location in Old Town Spring, and Pecan Lodge in Dallas' Deep Ellum neighborhood are a few worth trying (if you have the time to wait in line for your comfort food).

Texas' addictive breakfast tacos are also in the national spotlight. The Tex-Mex breakfast combo of fluffy flour tortillas, scrambled eggs, refried beans, bacon, and fiery salsa is spreading across the country, thanks in large part to the enthusiasm of breakfast-taco fans who attend the annual South by Southwest festival in Austin every spring.

Chili *con carne*, that Texas comfort food of the cowboy era, has lately been making a comeback across the country—it never went out of style at my house. But according to people who keep track of these things, "chili" has been among the top recipe requests on internet search engines for the past few years.

My new tome, *The Chili Cookbook*, which came out last month, offers a whole lot of variations on chili including New Mexican green chile and red chile stews, Cincinnati chili with spaghetti, and modern versions with and without *frijoles*. I was astonished to discover while researching the book that there is a connection between Texas cowboy chili and Hungarian goulash. So I have lately added goulash to my family's list of favorite comfort foods. (My kids call it chili and noodles.)

Just in time for the holidays, I'm also celebrating the return of one of my all-time-favorite comfort foods, now that Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla once again graces the bottom shelf of my freezer. Homemade pie just doesn't taste the same without it. ★

A co-founder of Foodways Texas (www.foodwaystexas.com), James Beard Award-winning writer and culinary historian Robb Walsh co-owns El Real Tex-Mex restaurant in Houston.



Koffee Kup Family Restaurant, Hico