

Childhood comfort food back for another helping

Nostalgic burst brings carbs back in a big way

By Carole Dixon
Special for USA TODAY

Not long ago, it seemed the entire country's diet-conscious were worshipping at the temple of low-carb.

From the Atkins diet to low-carbohydrate breads, pastas and chocolate bars, Americans were hooked. Many lost weight but worried about their cholesterol from all the steak, eggs and cheese they ate.

Plus, they were tired of depriving themselves of carb-laden comfort foods, especially those reminiscent of childhood.

Bread bars and cupcake shops began opening, and top chefs began putting childhood favorites with a twist back on their menus. Now restaurantgoers can't get enough truffle mac 'n' cheese, posh potato dishes, artisanal breads and fancy dessert cakes. Chicken pot pie, anyone?

California's 18-year-old La Brea Bakery now distributes to more than 44 states, Wolfgang Puck eateries and Four Seasons hotels. "The Northeast has been a big growth area, while Southern California and the Pacific Northwest continue to grow," CEO John Yamin says. "We built a new bakery in New Jersey to help keep up with the demand on the East Coast."

Sales of artisanal bread nationwide have increased an average of 4% a year the past three years and represent 13% of the bread market, Yamin says.

In Sausalito, Calif., Larry Mindel, founder/director of the Italian restaurant and bakery chain Il Fornaio, also has seen a carb comeback. "In 2003-2004, low-carb hit the scene. We saw our percentage of pasta dishes decline from 33%-34% to 30%-31% of total sales. Our menu mix has since returned to pre-craze growth, and we are experiencing even higher numbers: 34% of our sales is pasta."

The company is building an 85,000-square-foot bread-baking facility to keep up with demand. The old facility has been running at full capacity for two years and is experiencing double-digit growth.

Viand in Chicago has changed its theme to food such as chicken pot pie with the arrival of chef Steve Chiappetti last fall. A best-selling item is the new Junk Food Cart, a mini shopping cart filled with homemade marshmallows, Oreos and brownies.



Photos by Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Smackin' good: S'MAC restaurant in New York serves only macaroni and cheese dishes; 12 different kinds in all are on the menu.

Where the carbs are

► **Viand**, Chicago; Junk Food Cart with brownies and cookies, \$6; 312-255-8505; viandchicago.com

► **BLT Steak**, Washington, D.C.; popovers free with dinner, take-home order, \$2; 202-689-8999; bltsteak.com

► **The American Restaurant**, Kansas City, Mo.; lobster shepherd's pie, \$21; 816-545-8001; theamericanrestaurantkc.com

► **StripSteak**, Las Vegas; duck-fat fries, \$8, and potato-purée trio, \$12; 702-632-7414; michaelmina.net/stripsteak

► **Ditch Plains**, New York; Ditch Dog topped with mac 'n' cheese, \$8; 212-633-0202; ditch-plains.com

► **Gordon's Café and Wine Bar**, Yountville, Calif.; scones, coffeecake, sticky buns, savory bread pudding, \$2-\$3.50; 707-944-8246

► **S'MAC**, New York; 12 varieties of mac 'n' cheese, \$4.25-\$16; 212-358-7912; smacnyc.com

Chiappetti and his wife also own an old-fashioned bakery where they turn out cupcakes, cookies and breads inspired by their children. "Banana Bakery was a response to what the market was looking for," he says. "The demand has definitely increased."

Meanwhile, Laurent Tourondel's BLT steak empire has brought its signature popovers to its new outlet in Washington, D.C. "People love the popovers we serve. They often ask to take some home with them, even after they've eaten more than one at dinner," he says. "When I open new restaurants, the first question is often, 'Will you be serving popovers?'"

Also riding the carb wave is executive chef Celina Tio of The American Restaurant in Kansas City, Mo., with her lobster shepherd's pie laden with potato mousseline. She almost had a revolt when she tried to remove it from the menu a few years ago: "It created an uproar."

Michael Mina, who brought lobster pot pie to San Francisco and the Bellagio in Las Vegas, has opened StripSteak at Vegas' Mandalay Bay, where he serves duck-fat fries with three dipping sauces and a potato-purée trio with lobster, corn and horseradish. They have been flying out the door.

At Gordon's Café in Yountville, Calif., owner/baker Sally Gordon has customers lining up for her scones. Her savory bread puddings sell out so quickly that people call ahead to reserve them.

Chic hotels also are piling on to the starchy trend. At the Peninsula in New York, the new room-service menu offers mac 'n' cheese in a bread bowl, cheesecake and freshly baked pretzels.

Some chefs have perfected carb layering. At Ditch Plains in Manhattan, the Ditch Dog is a hot dog in a soft potato bun topped with mac 'n' cheese made with gruyère, Parmesan and white American cheese.

As chef Marc Murphy says, "Nobody is worried about carbs, especially at 1 a.m."

Talk about taking childhood-fave mac 'n' cheese to the max: Sarita Ekyia and her husband, Caesar, in June opened S'MAC in Manhattan, which serves only macaroni and cheese. The 12 varieties include brie with figs and rosemary and goat cheese with spinach and olives.

"Mac and cheese is very nostalgic food," Sarita says. As far as she knows, hers is the only all mac 'n' cheese emporium in the country. "When people come here from elsewhere, they tell us how much they want something similar in their area."

Nothing carb-shy about that.