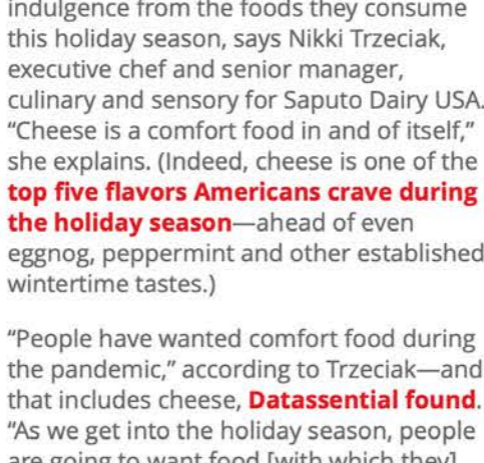




Your Business

'Tis the Season for Festive—and Cheesy—Holiday Menu Items

Holiday celebrations will look and feel different for most people this year due to the pandemic and **evolving restrictions in many U.S. states and around the world**. Smaller family gatherings, fewer (if any) restaurant buffets and other eating-related adjustments won't stop people from enjoying their favorite traditional holiday foods—including macaroni and cheese, gratins and other rich, satisfying dishes—however.



Given all of the lifestyle changes this year has required, it's likely that people will seek a sense of both nostalgia and indulgence from the foods they consume this holiday season, says Nikki Trzeciak, executive chef and senior manager, culinary and sensory for Saputo Dairy USA. "Cheese is a comfort food in and of itself," she explains. (Indeed, cheese is one of the **top five flavors Americans crave during the holiday season**—ahead of even eggnog, peppermint and other established wintertime tastes.)

"People have wanted comfort food during the pandemic," according to Trzeciak—and that includes cheese, **Datassential found**. "As we get into the holiday season, people are going to want food [with which they] have an emotional connection," Trzeciak says. When chefs integrate cheese into their dishes, those feelings of nostalgia, indulgence and comfort are amplified. How are they capitalizing on that in this strangest of years? Read on ...

Holiday Fare at Home

Last year, 13% of consumers planned to **purchase all or part of their Thanksgiving meal from a restaurant to enjoy at home**.

In the current environment, with so many parents trying to balance working from home and overseeing their children's remote learning experience, Trzeciak expects ordering out will be even more popular this year. "You don't get days to prep [while] kids are in school," she says. "Everybody is wearing a bunch of different hats, and some people will be looking for an easy solution" to their holiday planning.

And for those who love cheese, there's good news: Many classic cheeses (including **cheddar**) are appearing on restaurants' Thanksgiving dinner to-go menus this year.

Fatz Café, a 22-unit chain of restaurants serving Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, has offered a takeout meal package on Thanksgiving for more than a decade. Its Holiday Feast offering, which serves 10 to 12 people, includes a fried turkey, ham or turkey breast and several pre-selected sides. There's also a build-your-own option with a la carte offerings, including a mixed greens salad with Monterey jack and cheddar cheese and a sharp cheddar-based Homestyle Mac & Cheese, which Fatz Vice President of Brand Development Brian Hood describes as having a slightly smoky, woody flavor.

Customers don't always order the full feast, however, Hood says. Some opt to make their main course at home and pick up several side dishes to serve with it. Side options include cheese grits—a fan favorite sold year-round—and the Autumn Salad, which features spinach, candied pecans, a sweet onion and cranberry vinaigrette, and blue cheese.

"The Autumn Salad is unique to the holiday menu and fits the flavor profiles that are going on this time of year," Hood explains. "[We sell] a lot of dressing, mashed potatoes, green beans; people don't necessarily get turkey or ham but they will order the sides."

Consumers may be similarly interested in customizable take-home appetizers sized for their immediate family to enjoy, such as a smaller version of the **cheese and charcuterie plate** a host would put out when having people over for the holidays.

"People want to keep a semblance of normalcy [this holiday season]. I can see people trying to create the same feeling and have a similar experience," Trzeciak says. When assembling her own cheese boards, she says, "I always like to include a super-approachable cheese everyone will eat, like cheddar; a drier cheese, like **Parmesan**; and something creamy, like a triple cream [brie]."

Additional Ingredient Panache

Carefully crafted, unconventional courses and other buzzworthy holiday menu items may help attract diners through the holiday season. Including cheese can be a difference maker: **As Datassential has found**, nearly half (46%) of consumers look forward to having signature cheese dishes when dining out. Six in 10 operators, meanwhile, say adding cheese helps dishes sell better.

Cheese isn't necessarily a staple ingredient in classic holiday dishes. But Trzeciak says it can be easily incorporated into menu items that suit the season. For example, a squash dish featuring sage—a flavor frequently associated with Thanksgiving—can be elevated (and appeal to cheese-lovers) by sprinkling Parmesan on top.

"Any nutty cheese—even an aged vintage cheddar—pairs with sage and squash," she says. "You can add cheese to rutabaga, mashed parsnips, a roasted root vegetable pot pie [sauce]. Once you add a little garlic, cheddar and chives, it takes a mashed potato to the next level."

Bottom line: For chefs, Trzeciak adds, "Cheese is a way to 'sexy up' your restaurant menu—and those traditional dishes."

Looking for other seasonal ideas to spark your imagination? Saputo's recipe database of appetizers, side dishes and more include dozens of options you can easily adapt for your next holiday menu.

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