Research Note

From Discomfort to Discourse: Comfort Food in Pandemic Australia

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Abstract: Australian examples of the consumption of and attitudes to comfort food are given as useful comparisons in highlighting what is essential to the concept. Through print media and informal interviews the article traces the later adoption of the phrase in Australia, showing the local reluctance to embrace the concept. A change is then noted, brought on generally by the enforced isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic and specifically through the acknowledgement by prominent food writers during one week. Subsequently comfort food became largely devoid of its previous moral judgement, replaced by a sense of shared experience which seemed to endorse one's belonging to the broader community.

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Comparative studies or examples can assist in demonstrating commonality of features and so can suggest the breadth of a concept. Yet no two contexts are fully identical, and attention to those differences may help to identify core features of a concept in a more nuanced way. The question of whether comfort food is a universal concept or whether it is limited to modern western societies (Jones & Long 2017) elides the many differences which may be between those western countries. Australia has been very late in adopting the U.S.A. term *comfort food,* but seems to have undergone a rapid adoption of it during the pandemic years.

The phrase *comfort food* is now traced in print back to 1962 (*OED, online*), and clearly the expression was long in use in North America before coming to the notice of the *OED* scribes. This same *OED* source cites a 1990 example in print in Australia but one which is strongly marked as *not* Australian: "Even at fairly formal dinner parties, 'comfort foods' have starred—corn soup, meat loaf, cold black bean soup.". These examples would not be recognized in Australia as comfort foods and the overall usage here would seem to be an over-zealous import from American speech. Indeed, in Australia there was very little adoption of the phrase *comfort food*, either at that time or for several decades thereafter. For example, also in the 1990s, the extensive and locally authoritative *Macquarie Dictionary* (1997) cited only two expressions containing the word *comfort* and both were euphemisms for bodily functions. It would take another 20 years for the phrase *comfort food* to appear in this leading Australian national dictionary.

Why so slow? The story of its almost-reluctant adoption "downunder" and how the concept and its language were navigated there may reveal some aspects of what is essential in the phrase. In addition to dictionary entries, this text will rely on print media as well as informal interviews.

Through those decades of non-use, the expression and concept of *comfort food* ran counter to strong national health messages which encouraged freshness and a variety of foods endorsed as nutritional. Tips on how to select and prepare these foods included minimizing meat and fats, while including regular seafood with seasonal fruit and vegetables. The "Mediterranean diet" was repeatedly praised for its benefit of increasing one's lifespan. Underlying this discourse was a sense of moral judgement—that those who did not abide by it thereby showed a lack of self-control, were prone to obesity, even to a lack of respect for their life and thus likely to be a burden on the Australian national health scheme. This highly refined moral judgement superseded the long-time criticism of the high-volume consumption of food—judgement of those who possibly were slaves to gluttony. While *comfort food* was heard on the media from the U.S.A., such is the nature of global media—looking for extremes and excess—that much of the image of Americans presented to Australians demonstrated and reinforced the pre-existing negative views on food choices and practices of U.S. residents. An Australian would be less inclined to want to be associated with a country which seemingly took too much comfort from its food while justifying it as *comfort food.*

However, popular culture is increasingly pervasive and useful concepts will eventually find a place. When the expression *comfort food* did appear in the Australian dictionaries, its meaning there was quite narrow—*any food which gives comfort to an individual, typically warming, traditional dishes such as steamed puddings, stews, etc.* (*Macquarie Dictionary* 1997). Devoid of any hint of excess, inappropriateness, or moral judgement, this definition is almost a synonym for *convalescent or invalid fare*. It is for an individual who through no fault of their own needs and perhaps deserves some comfort. Negative judgements were still there for others and oral usage had largely become gendered, as in "weight-shaming". Judgements centered on a shameful self-indulgence frequently expressed as "a guilty secret," and if acknowledged was with a shy mix of almost-illicit pleasure and embarrassment. However actual usage of the expression *comfort food* was still rare. If anyone bravely admitted to consuming it, they would likely to be using it as a synonym for the similarly derogatory home-cooked *stodge* ("food that is heavy, filling, and high in carbohydrates"). In Australia, so marked was the expression that a restaurant would advertise *hearty* rather than *comfort food* in their menu item descriptions (lest it be described in a review as *stodge*).

As elsewhere, the pandemic's initial lockdown prompted an increase in home cooking, as well as in the storage and consumption of ready-to-eat non-perishables. Carbohydrates dominated here, e.g. supermarkets' pasta shelves quickly became empty, but stock-piling also included much food that was seen as an indulgence—sweet or fat and processed, such as ice-cream, cookies, or potato crisps ("chips" in the U.S.). The enforced extended period of solitary or home consumption led in Australia to what seems a refocus of the value and place of comfort food. Carbohydrates were seen locally not for comfort but as simply a necessity as the base for a meal, and well-stocked pantries gave the reassurance of having a long-term supply of "survival food" (while "warming food" played a minor role, perhaps due to Australia's temperate climate).

The main refocus was where *comfort food* came to be more often seen as the indulgence, and that the circumstances of the lockdowns permitted it. Having to make exceptional arrangements (for work, schooling, socializing, family events), and with fewer judgemental eyes of others, there was individual licence for indulgence—largely in those pre-processed foods high in fats and sugars. Still, public discourse would rarely acknowledge this consumption. Alcohol played a similar role with a greatly increased daytime consumption but this did become part of public discourse in a joking and derogatory manner. For example, the comedian Sammy J, in implementing home schooling, called the regular teacher to ask for advice such as "What time do you normally start drinking on a school day, 10am?" (ABC television, May 7, 2020). While individuals were not so confessional, such broader public discussion seems to have been an enabler for the later accepted discussion of comfort food.

At a more individual level, enquiring in 2020 about someone's preferred *comfort food*, as I did regularly, was mostly seen as intrusive unless amongst family or close friends. The private practice meant that the expression had become near synonymous with *guilty secrets*, where one's former food standards—in taste, quality, class, sustainability (or virtue signalling)—were revealed as being only lightly or insincerely held.

It is hard to mark the change, but late in the first year of the pandemic one indicator is the newspaper presentation (Dubeki 2020: 4-5) where seven leading chefs and food writers were asked to publicly reveal their *guilty secrets*, "their deepest, darkest (and most comforting) food secrets." Phrased in this way the article embraces the most judgemental aspect of comfort food. Yet in this exercise those whose professional commitment to food might suggest they had most to lose in such revelations, here seemed at ease in declaring their comfort in: chocolate brownies, white chocolate (despite acknowledging it having no actual chocolate in it), tomato sauce (despite acknowledging its heavy load of salt and sugar), crisps (the regular kind which sting one's tongue), chocolate-coated licorice (but a version not based on palm oil), Caramello Koala bears, and Twix bars. Their examples suggest physical satisfaction as the main aim, with an occasional place but not as regular foods.

Figure 1: Guilty Secrets (see Dubecki 2020)
Image from the Sydney Morning Herald, *November 10, 2020*

Figure 2: White Chocolate, Meat Pie, and Crisps (See Dubecki 2020)
Image from the Sydney Morning Herald, *November 10, 2020*

Despite the article's title, two of the three questions in the survey were based on "classics" and so were standard topics for such professional chefs. First there was "Go-to twist on a classic," and then a "Classic due for revival." Their responses to the last included: crème

caramel, custard puddings (which his mother made), chocolate-coated ice-cream, chicken and pineapple, after-dinner mints, steak and kidney pie, and pasta carbonara (without the cream). As if revelling in their revelations of guilty secrets, here the nominated "classics" include two pre-processed foods. Across both "classics" sections, six cite family links in their choices, making clear the nostalgia aspect. There is no marked difference in gender (four of the seven are women) or background (three have Asian heritage). There is some detail linking to their usual specialized writing— eating tomato sauce off one's hand is compared to a "caviar bump." In all, the revelation, enthusiasm, and almost careless adoption of the expression "guilty secret," here by leading food influencers, implicitly lends licence to others to speak more candidly of their own similar experience. Reinforced by the familiar items chosen, this occurs within the context of a shared accessible Australian identity.

As if to further reinforce the acceptance of comfort food, the same publication followed up five days later with a feature article on the English food writer Nigella Lawson. This article announced her latest cookbook which was written during the lockdown. We are told that her book "stresses pleasure, decadence, indulgence" to the extent that she would actively dismiss the guilt from *guilty pleasure*, and this within the context of comfort food. Without further unpacking its details, the whole article adds to the message of licence to others, somewhat freeing their own agency in re-creating meaning.

Whether the two articles in this week marked the turning point or gave impetus to a trend, what I had noticed subsequently was generally more acceptance of discussion about one's preferred comfort food. It no longer seemed as near-intimate a question, and answers came fairly freely. Specific items ranged from the small Magnum ice-creams (chocolate-coated, expensive) to the budget chocolate-coated licorice logs (only $2AU for a pack of five); from hot potato fries to a meat pie. Something had changed in a short time—there was acceptance that *comfort food* could in part be fulfilling a need to connect and to belong.

Today a question of *Your comfort food?* is more likely to include responses of *pasta* and *noodles* than previously. More strikingly, though, is that such discourse is now largely devoid of moral judgement. The concept does maintain some element of nostalgia but the focus is more firmly on the present and with a feeling of necessity, for relief or pleasure. Its use is largely self-deprecating, and confessed with humour. In addition to declaring home practices, it is as if one can reveal one's participation in the most basic levels of the industrial food system, and this shared experience seems to endorse one's belonging to the broader community. The small comfort of the food leads to more social comfort.

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