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70 dishes that remind you of home

The comfort of home cooking isn't just found in your mother's kitchen anymore. Family favorites such as meatloaf and mac and cheese have made their way into Cleveland restaurants making it easy for us to indulge in classic meals anytime we want.



Len Mastro/Element Photo

MEATLOAF

BBQ Meatloaf

The Harp, \$11.99

Some people argue meatloaf is boring. We think of each version like a snowflake — basic ingredients that all end up a little bit different on their journey from the mixing bowl to your plate. And since The Harp has kept our bellies pleasantly full of Irish boxty and fish and chips over the years, it was time to try its cooked-with-love spin on BBQ meatloaf. We were delighted to find a hulking slab swabbed with a mellow, spicy sauce over a bed of rightfully lumpy homemade mashed potatoes. But here's what'll bring a tear to mom's eye: The loaf crumbles apart with the tap of a fork, and there's not a dry bit to be found. Oh yeah, in case your sides weren't already splitting, batter-dipped onion rings and a chef's choice vegetable round out the dish. *4408 Detroit Ave., Cleveland; (216) 939-0200, www.the-harp.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

By the time you're finished, that morning spent digging your car out of a snowdrift will be a distant thought.

Turkey Meatloaf

Dish Deli, \$5

Biting into the turkey meatloaf at Dish Deli in Tremont is like a rookie Scotch drinker taking his first sip of a single-malt selection. There are so many flavors — all great — that by the time you're done savoring and ready to start identifying the tastes, you're finished. There's no gravy and no ketchup along with this meal, and you wouldn't want to hide the flavors with them either. You won't even want to bring the mashed potatoes along for the ride. The vegetables — carrots, celery and, um, we'll need a second helping to tell you more — mixed into the meat are unbelievably fresh. Plus, it's made of turkey, so it's got to count as healthy, right? *1112 Kenilworth Ave., Tremont, (216) 523-7000*

COMFORT LEVEL

Perfect lunch to take a diet hiatus and not feel awful about later.

Meatloaf with Wild Mushrooms

ML the Restaurant, \$19.90

Ask chef Michael Longo what that extra flavor is in the meatloaf. Sure, we know it's made of Kobe beef and veal. But beyond that rich flavor, there's something else. He wouldn't tell us, and he thought we were just casual customers. He just smiled. He's asked a lot, the bartender says. The extra kick takes it from something you can make to something worth paying for. If it isn't a special occasion, sit at the bar. It's regularly populated by regulars where everyone knows each other's name — like "Cheers," but with two parts Frasier, one part Norm. *16725 Chillicothe Road, Chagrin Falls, (440) 543-6567*

COMFORT LEVEL

It'll warm you up on a brisk day before heading out on a hike.

Meatloaf Sandwich

Lucky's Café, \$7.50

A sandwich is just two pieces of bread with something between them. A "sammich" — as it's conceived here — is carefully constructed and infused with love (and we all know that tastes much better). So when you've finished the day's to-dos, head over to Lucky's Café and order up the meatloaf sandwich any way you'd like — we had our piping-hot portion of the homespun classic with onions, peppers and subtle spices. It's served on baked-in-house Como, rustic Italian bread that crisps up on the press, and comes with chips, a pickle and your choice of condiments. We went with a classic, kid-friendly slice of Cheddar to top it all off. *777 Starkweather, Cleveland, (216) 622-7773, www.luckyscafe.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Walking barefoot through grass that someone else cut

Comfort Zone

Pickwick and Frolic

Pickwick and Frolic didn't invent anything on its menu. It didn't even re-invent anything. No, says owner Nick Kostis, "We just wanted to create something memorable."

So Kostis spent four years — two of those crisscrossing the county — developing the restaurant's rustic American concept and menu: porridges (soup), rotisserie chicken, meatloaf, lasagna, pork chops, filet.

He calls it "our narrative" — like curling up next to a fire with a good book. Here, the characters are authentic (just like the food): Charles Dickens, Short Vincent Street, the stone hearth oven, a rotisserie spit that uses cherry, mesquite and apple woods, and our roots as an old American city that hosted the masses who migrated to this country.

The food here tastes like prosperity, an abundance forged in the mills and in the neighborhoods.

ANGUS & CHORIZO MEATLOAF SANDWICH, \$9.95

A meatloaf sandwich was a Star Wars lunchbox delicacy — cold ground chuck, squishy white bread and yellow mustard. It was out of place next to everyone else's baloney, but kids would offer just about anything as a trade. Well, we're not swapping anything for Pickwick & Frolic's inch-thick version. It's tender and moist with the chorizo lending an earthy, spicy, Latin influence.

PICKWICK'S POTTED POULTRY, \$9.95

Pot pie used to mean it came from the grocery's frozen food section. It also meant peeling off the crust to get at the cubed chicken (we think) and veggies. This will erase that memory and have you devouring the flaky crust, hand-pulled rotisserie chicken and real vegetables in a creamy sauce.

PICKWICK SIGNATURE S'MORE, \$4.95

This 'round-the-campfire favorite is served right out of the oven as a graham cracker, chocolate and marshmallow soufflé. Garnished with fresh berries, the best part of this gooey dessert is the melty chocolate center, baked inside a graham cracker crust and topped with toasted 'mallow cream. This s'more is more fun shared.

2035 E. Fourth St., Cleveland, (216) 241-7425, www.pickwickandfrolic.com

POTATOES



Len Mastr/Element Photo



Michael Cavotta

Lobster Tots

Boulevard Blue, \$6

In grade school cafeterias, it was always cause for celebration when tater tots appeared on the line. Compared to the inauspicious mystery meats and questionable Jell-O, tater tots represented truth, justice and the American Way — or, at least, a way to eat “vegetables” in a thoroughly enjoyable fashion. Boulevard Blue has taken our fondness for the childhood favorite to a new level with its lobster tater tots. About 10 appear still steaming on a platter, looking like fresh, mini beignets. Bite into one, and you’ll sink deeper into your chair with happiness. The smooth potato mix, reminiscent of a Southern hush puppy in texture, is sprinkled liberally with buttery morsels of fresh lobster. The pleasing inside is surrounded, in the manner of the best of tots, with a perfectly crispy exterior. Slather on some of the accompanying avocado crème fraiche, and just like when

you were a kid, you might not feel like sharing.

12718 Larchmere Blvd., Cleveland, (216) 721-5500, www.boulevardblue.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes you feel family-reunion-in-Maine happy.

Lobster Mashed Potatoes

Blue Point Grille, \$8

Lobster is a red-convertible, cool-crowd kind of food. Like your first crush, the thought of it makes you feel giddy (even if you only got that one kiss). Mashed potatoes are reliable, strong and always there when you’re sad. This dish is like the unexpected, but brilliant, marriage between the dreamer and the realist — the fluffy, buttery pile of potatoes supports the meaty chunks of rich lobster. It’s the same as movie night on the couch — with candles and a bottle of wine for two. 700 W. St. Clair, Cleveland, (216) 875-7827, www.hospitalityrestaurants.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Holding hands during a moonlit stroll

Blue Cheese Tater Tots

Ballantine, \$24 (part of rib eye steak entrée)

It’s not really fair to call these tater tots. The potato is sliced into thin, hash-brownlike strips. When you take a bite, you’ll encounter the sweetness of the potato and the familiar hints of bacon, but you may not notice the blue cheese until you swallow. They take a lot of preparation, so they are only served aside steak (sorry, no separate orders). But Ballantine seemingly did the impossible: We salivate more thinking about the potatoes than the accompanying meat. 4113 Erie St., Willoughby, (440) 942-5151, www.theballantine.net

COMFORT LEVEL

Will take your mind off all those leaves you still have to rake.

White Cheddar Mashed Potatoes

Cleveland Chop House, \$3.95

You’ll forget about rush hour once you step off of St. Clair and into the 1940s-inspired Cleveland Chop House. The dimmed lights and sounds of Big Band music quiet the hustle of downtown. Settle into one of

the comfortable, oversized booths and relive a time when meals weren't rushed and mashed potatoes weren't instant. One bite of the heaping mound of white cheddar mashed potatoes whipped with cheese and sprinkled with parsley and you'll feel sorry for whoever spent all day peeling potatoes, but you'll also be grateful they did. 824 W. St. Clair Ave., Cleveland, (216) 623-0909, www.chophouse.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Crooning along to Billie Holiday on your iPod

Back 40 Curly Fries

Mike's Place, \$6.29

Bar food, ahh, we remember it well. Those college days when eating a dozen chicken wings at midnight seemed normal. Cheese, potatoes and bacon were all building blocks in our junk-food pyramid, and Mike's Place in Kent has an interesting take on the trio. Start with a pile of fries. No, make that seasoned curly fries. Then, add cheese. Make that, cheeses — gobs of ooey-goey Cheddar sauce and a handful of shredded mozzarella. Top with bacon — not crumbles, but entire strips — and add a dollop of sour cream for good measure. Mike's Place then throws it all in a large, deep-fried tortilla shell, just to show they care. 1700 S. Water St., Kent, (330) 673-6501, www.mikesplacereastaurant.com

COMFORT LEVEL

If you bomb a midterm, the fries are worth the 2-mile trudge from campus.

SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER

Stuffed Pork Chop

Thyme, the Restaurant, \$21

The menu description of the pork chops at Thyme in Medina make them sound like nothing a finicky dad or little brother would touch: celery, fennel and smoked rambol cheese stuffing, served with grilled asparagus, hush puppies and apple pork jus. Just tell them it'll be fine. It's worth it. Biting into the thick pork chop (cooked to your specifications), you're greeted with a sweet taste that must come from the jus. Soon the flavor blends with a contrasting salty surge. The stuffing is not dominating. The pork itself is tender, and tastes exactly like what your finicky eating partners will expect. 716 N. Court St., Medina, (330) 764-4114, www.thymetherestaurant.com

Comfort Level

An orange-and-brown stocking cap with a Browns helmet logo on the front and tassel on the top

Creekside Pot Roast

Eddie's Creekside, \$8.95

The building blocks of your mom's pot roast are all here, just rearranged. The traditional hunks of spud are reinterpreted as a potato pancake. The roast, once the star of the show, is now thin strips of meat hidden beneath a hearty helping of thick pan gravy (no watery, weak-sister stuff here) and onion strings. It's listed under

"sandwich" on the menu, but there's not a slice of bread to be found. It would only get in the way of this deliciously constructed family classic. The bonus is you also get to choose from a comfort-laden selection



Brad Ronevich

of sides too. Aunt Sharon's Baked Beans sounded like a spoonful of family reunion to us. We were happy to discover Aunt Sharon's secret ingredient must be barbecue sauce. *8803 Brecksville Road, Brecksville, (440) 546-0555, www.eddiescreekside.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Licking the cake batter off the beaters of mom's electric mixer

Open-faced Hot Roast Turkey Sandwich

The Diner on Clifton, \$7.25

This diner speciality certainly looks the part — overly generous portions of roasted turkey breast and real mashed potatoes swimming in steaming hot gravy goodness. But instead of the boring piece of Wonder Bread, this open-faced sandwich is anchored by an oversized slice of buttery, grilled sourdough and served with the veggie of the day. The diner feels much the same way — familiar with its black patent leather stools at the front counter and resident raspy-voiced waitress who knows all the regulars by name — making it a popular lunch spot for everyone from art students to executives. *11637 Clifton Blvd., Cleveland, (216) 521-5003*

COMFORT LEVEL

A midday pick-me-up for the chilly Monday blues

Lobster Cassoulet

Pier W, \$41

Whenever anything would simmer on the stove for hours, we knew we were in for a treat. Pier W's lobster cassoulet proves this with an American twist on a traditional French country meal. Slow cooked in earthenware, this casserole-like dish arrives with a whole lobster's worth of buttery, tender meat atop creamy cannellini beans. The light, delicate flavor of the seafood perfectly complements the heartiness of the beans. So scoop some onto your plate — we know you've been patient. *Winton Place, 12700 Lake Ave., Lakewood, (216) 228-2250, www.selectrestaurants.com/pier/index.html*

COMFORT LEVEL

Sitting in front of a fireplace with a good book

Mary Yoder's Sampler Platter

Mary Yoder's Amish Kitchen, \$12.39

A trip to Middlefield takes you through open spaces and long, stretching roads, providing a chance to relax and unwind. And, trust us, you'll want to pace yourself as you scoop up this trio of homemade favorites. The baked chicken thigh, shredded roast beef in gravy and thick slice of ham (with a dab of pineapple sauce) send you straight back to long wintertime dinners with family. Be sure to mosey through the mound of real mashed potatoes, complete with pool of brown gravy in the center, and the scoop of thick, cheesy macaroni. Bonus: you can order the dishes family style for the full dining-with-Grandpa-Frank experience. *14743 N. State St., (440) 632-1939, Middlefield, www.maryyodersamishkitchen.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

This one will slow you down too. Curl up and take a nap.

Pork Chops Stuffed with Olives and Mushrooms

The Grill at Bainbridge Commons, \$15.95

Like a cashmere sweater, this stuffed pork chop is soft and light, but warm and inviting. And why not, owner Marc Jacobson has been making it for years at home. His version is filled with kalamata olives and a stuffing made from crimini, shitake and oyster mushrooms. Earthy with bright bursts like an autumn canopy, it's served with a side of Cheddar-mashed potatoes. *17800 Chillicothe Road, Chagrin Falls, (440) 543-0670, www.thegrillatbainbridgecommons.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Knowing you'll be using a leaf blower rather than a rake this year



Michael Cavotta

Meat and Potatoes Tasting

Light Bistro, \$65

The first course doesn't exactly scream "comfort food." We've never seen sliced circles of boar and fingerling potatoes fanned across a plate atop warm fruit compote and garnished with a strand of green onion. As the courses come marching out, and the plate proffering a wild mushroom vichyssoise (cream soup) surrounding a hunk of crispy pork belly is replaced with chef Matt Mathlage's version of a cheeseburger in paradise (chopped sirloin wrapped in a rib eye bun with an accompanying tomato terrine, hunk of bleu cheese and

truffled french fries). The tribute to our childhood staple emerges: He's playing with the idea of the classic American dinner, while keeping the flavors simple and familiar. You'll recognize the elements, but the whole is delightfully surprising. 2801 Bridge Ave., Cleveland, (216) 771-7130, www.lightbistro.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Riding your bike by yourself for the first time

CHICKEN

Chicken & Waffles

Southside, \$9

Indulging in breakfast at night seemed odd at first — and eating waffles with chicken even more so. One bite into a crispy Belgian waffle topped with a heap of cinnamon butter, powdered sugar and a chicken breast, we wondered why we haven't been eating the soul food-inspired combo more often. The syrupy bites of waffles mixed with juicy chicken worked well — so well we expected to get yelled at for eating dessert for dinner.

Once we added a touch of hot sauce, we couldn't handle our utensils fast enough to keep shoveling the sweet,

salty and very hot dish in our mouths. 2207 W. 11th St., Tremont, (216) 937-2288,

www.southsidecleveland.com



Barney Taxel

COMFORT LEVEL

Reading the Sunday paper in bed

Buttermilk Fried Chicken

Henry's at the Barn, \$19 Henry's at the Barn calls to mind a style that is so definitively Southern, all white tablecloths and clinking wine glasses, with Low Country food given a place of honor at the table. In the midst of this opulent approach, the buttermilk fried chicken seems almost like the country cousin. It rests near the bottom of the menu, after glorious descriptions of all manner of things that swim and trawl the ocean floor, looking so forlorn and ... ordinary. But diners who take a chance — and face the consternation of their servers — will revel in every juicy bite. The breading is thick but not greasy, with a satisfying crunch segueing into a boneless piece of pure white meat chicken. The flavor forgoes "deep fried" in favor of "sweet," so its sides are a necessary pop of tomato-stewed collards with a rich tomato

taste, smoky black-eyed peas and innocuous crab-and-corn hushpuppies. 36840 Detroit Road, Avon, (440) 328-6088, www.henrysatthebarn.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Walking out of church to find the first warm, sunny day of spring is at hand

Southern Fried Chicken

Fat Fish Blue, \$12.99

Fried chicken is to Southerners what clam chowder is to New Englanders. They know how to fix it up right, and this New Orleans-inspired haunt is no exception. The chicken is crispy on the outside and juicy all the way through. Served with “forgot to peel-em” redskin mashers, steamed veggies and a large hunk of melt-in-your-mouth cornbread, it’s smothered with a creamy peppercorn gravy that’s just spicy enough to keep your taste buds jumpin’. Live blues music and servers who make you feel less like you’re being waited on and more like you’re sitting around an old friend’s kitchen table conjure up feelings of home for anyone, even if you’ve never set foot in the South. 21 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, (216) 875-6000, www.fatfishblue.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Takes the edge off that end-of-the-day battle with the copy machine.

Creamed Chicken Over Puffed Pastry

Treats Tea Room, \$6.95

When we were young, we were known to perform “surgery” on certain dishes to remove vegetables. This earned our parents’ reproach, and it certainly wouldn’t fly at dinner parties today. Therefore, we were pleased when served Treats Tea Room’s creamed chicken over puffed pastry — nary a vegetable in sight. A delicious block of flaky pastry is bathed in a warm, mildly spiced sauce and diced chicken breast. At once, it evokes casseroles and chipped beef and creamed soups. It’s uncomplicated, but that’s refreshing. It’s exactly the dish we would have cooked when we were younger, if we were allowed to touch the stove. 1325 Linda St., Rocky River, (440) 331-3414

COMFORT LEVEL

Like a new, warm pair of fuzzy slippers

Pretzel Chicken

Willoughby Brewing Company, \$16.99

For those who love the thick country-fried steak breading that soaks up gravy on the spot, this breaded chicken with its layers of pretzel crumb coating will also do the trick with some extra crunch to boot. The crumb coating acts as a shield to the river of gravy flowing from the melt-in-your-mouth mashed potatoes, but the traditional flour breading soaks up gravy for the perfect ratio of chicken, breading and gravy in each bite. Unlike the customary milk gravy that covers country-fried steak, a whiskey peppercorn sauce evokes the tangy taste of stroganoff. 4057 Erie St., Willoughby, (440) 975-0202, www.willoughbybrewing.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Going to Grandma’s for dinner

MAC AND CHEESE

Chipotle Cheddar Macaroni and Cheese

Fleming’s Prime Steakhouse, \$7.50

Sometimes there’d be breadcrumbs on top, sometimes hunks of hot dog, maybe even some bits of bacon. That’s the way we grew up eating mac-and-cheese — an occasional surprise ingredient to give

the old standby a twist. The chipotle cheddar macaroni and cheese from Fleming's looks like the standard stuff. Sure, we knew it had to have a kick, but one bite didn't do it. It has a slow burn. But after a few more, we really tasted the well-hidden chunks of peppers. Next time we make mac-and-cheese at home, we're throwing these in. *28869 Chagrin Blvd., Woodmere, (216) 896-9000, www.flemingssteakhouse.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Laying out at the beach just a touch too long.

Camembert Mac & Cheese

Wonder Bar, \$8

We've traded our Crayolas for a Montblanc, so it's time to redefine what we want in a mac-and-cheese, too. Why not upgrade to Camembert? Sure, it's hard to pronounce, sophisticated and, well, French. But good ol' American gumption melts it, tosses it with noodles and calls it dinner. The mild-as-brie cheese is enticing, but subtle enough to let the flavors of duck and truffled breadcrumbs (you can add them for \$2 each) linger and warm your taste buds. Treat for the kids? Nah, this is all about the power lunch. *2044 E. Fourth St., Cleveland, (216) 298-4050, www.wonderbarcleveland.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

The broken heel on your brand-new Manolo Blahniks can be fixed.

Spaghetti with Mama's Famous White Sauce

Carrie Cerino's Ristorante, \$14

Italian moms — the kind who mutter in their native tongue — ignored the prepackaged blue boxes of elbow mac and powdered cheese in favor of fresh mounds of grated Parmesan cheese atop noodles. That's what Dominic Cerino used as a basis for his Spaghetti with Mama's Famous White Sauce at Carrie Cerino's Ristorante (named after mom). This rich and creamy dish is simple and unpretentious. Cerino says it is comfort: "Huge carbs with the pasta and a ton of fat with the butter and Parmesan cheese. Our white spaghetti is the mac-and-cheese of Norcia in Umbria." *8922 Ridge Road, North Royalton, (440) 237-3434, www.carriecerinos.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Like getting a big hug from mama

Macaroni

Lolita, \$15

When Michael Symon takes on comfort food, you expect a transformation. His macaroni dish at Lolita, his Tremont bistro, alters mac-and-cheese almost beyond recognition, using goat cheese, heavy cream and big pieces of chicken. Rosemary gives the dish a strong herby taste, and the cheese is mild and rich, contrasting with the chicken — its taste leaps out, full of bite. *900 Literary Road, Cleveland, (216) 771-5652, www.lolabistro.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Finishing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle on your own



Len Mastr/Element Photo

Comfort Zone Cheddar's Café

It started in the small storefront next to Snicker's Tavern in the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood, and has now taken over where Snicker's once was, proving that Cheddar's Café is all about using its noodle (and plenty of off-the-wall ingredients). "Everybody loves macaroni and cheese," says chef Matt Miller. By using local ingredients to give his mac-and-cheese a worldly taste, Miller has found a way to improve upon a favorite. "It takes you back to your childhood," he says. "There are so many things you can do from season to season using different cheeses and ingredients." And there's so much to eat, too. "Our portions are big," Miller says. "You can eat half now and save half for later." We get leftovers, too? Now, that's comforting.

GRECIAN MAC, \$9

Why eat another Greek salad when you can have this creamy combination of feta cheese, spinach and salty kalamata olives with a pinch of garlic and basil mixed in a bed of noodles?

TUSCAN MAC, \$11

A recent addition, this dish combining prosciutto and artichokes is our absolute favorite. With diced tomatoes, the sauce becomes slightly red and takes on a spaghetti-

like quality (in a very good way).

WESTERN MAC, \$9

Think Skyline Chili, but better. Wagonwheel pasta is covered in cheese sauce and layered with homemade chili filled with hunks of meat and beans, chopped Spanish onions and, of course, shredded cheddar cheese.

CRAZY MAC & CHEESE, \$8

Combining three different pastas (rotini, elbows and penne) isn't the only twist in this dish. Caramelized onions are mixed with a tangy and gooey mess of New York sharp and Cheddar cheese.

5800 Detroit Ave., Cleveland, (216) 631-7555

Sandwiches

Prince Henry Sandwich

Dish Global Deli, \$5

Ah, lunchtime. Upon occasion, we've been known to claim it was our favorite class in school. And for legions of brown baggers, lunchtime didn't get any more perfect than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. We didn't think it was possible to improve on this staple, but Dish Global Deli proved us wrong. Its Prince Henry sandwich pairs natural peanut butter with homemade mango raspberry jelly, served on lightly crisp nine-grain bread. Bananas are also included, but are optional. The sandwich is sweet, fun and refined. *1834 W. 25th St., Cleveland, (216) 589-9700, www.dishglobaldeli.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

An extra hour of recess for good behavior

Grilled Cheese Sandwich

John Q's Steakhouse, \$6.95

The sports memorabilia that accents the interior of John Q's Steakhouse Downtown may not be comforting to a Clevelander versed in the city's heart-breaking sports history, but this sandwich's four gooey layers of provolone, Swiss, American and Cheddar might. Crispy rye bread, strips of bacon and sweet onions contrast the melted cheese, enticing frustrated sports fans to unclench their jaws and bite into the savory sandwich.

Topped with tomatoes and served with John Q's original potato chips, this homemade classic is the remedy when you're sick of losing. *55 Public Square, Cleveland, (216) 861-0900, www.johnqssteakhouse.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes another loss a little more bearable

Carolina Pulled Pork Sandwich

Juniper Grille, \$7.95

It's hard to top a heaping pile of slow-cooked barbecued pork when it comes to Southern-style comfort. Luckily, downtown workers can get a midday fix in the form of Juniper Grille's multiple-napkins-required take on the classic pulled pork sandwich. (Warning: You won't go back to work smelling like you've been standing over a barbecue pit all day, but you may go back stained. Don't worry. It's worth the risk.) Served open-face style, the shredded pork is slathered in a sweet sauce that packs a kicky tang, mounded on Texas toast and topped with fried onion strings. The dish will leave you happy, full and ready to tackle the rest of your day with an extra dose of Southern Charm. *1332 Carnegie Ave., Cleveland, (216) 771-1334*

COMFORT LEVEL

A glass of sweet tea on the hottest day of the year

Mini Kobe Beef Sloppy Joes

Blue Canyon Kitchen & Tavern, \$8.99

Born during the Great Depression, when mothers made various meals out of cheap, available ground beef, this messy marvel soon became a dining-hall staple. Sure, a sloppy joe fits on a plastic cafeteria tray as perfectly as a paper-bag cover does on a textbook, but Blue Canyon rescues this dish from an



Heidi Zailer

otherwise bleak eternity as Manwich by pairing the world's trendiest beef with Cheddar cheese, chipotle sour cream and those adorable little slider buns. (And there are no hair nets in sight!) 8960 Wilcox Drive, Twinsburg, (330) 486-BLUE, www.bluecanyonrestaurant.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Hearing the words "open-book" for that history test you forgot to study for

Jalapeño Tuna Melt

Bistro 185, \$8.50 Great food can make forgiveness easy. So, Bistro 185, it's OK that you removed the vintage bowling machine from the North Collinwood tavern that began as Fritz's. And we'll let it slide that our ethnic favorites have touches of fine dining's "global cuisine." Heck, we'll even overlook that our beloved tuna melt is served on a pita rather than rye. Just fire up our souls with those jalapeño slices layered over a cool bed of tuna salad and melted Cheddar. And don't forget the house-made fries, which linger between potato chips and slices. Something this good must be a sin. We'll say an extra Hail Mary. 991 E. 185th St., (216) 481-9635, www.bistro185.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Coffee and doughnuts in the lower church after Mass

YT Medley

Yours Truly, \$6.20

This is a trend-obsessed world. The jeans that used to make us look so Vogue cover-worthy are now so eyebrow-raising (and not in a nice way). So it's reassuring to know that some things never change. That's why we go for a YT Medley — a crisp, toasted pita overstuffed with two fried eggs, bacon and melted American and Muenster cheese. It's greasy and filling. And that's the point: no-frills-please. Don't be surprised if the plate of '50s-diner grub makes you say things like "gee-whiz" and "yes, ma'am." Ordinary never felt so good. *Various locations*, www.ytr.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Last night's stupid mistake doesn't seem quite so embarrassing after all.

Polish Boy

Hot Sauce Williams, \$3.65

It is a delicious mess: a spicy kielbasa in a hot dog bun topped off with coleslaw, french fries and a generous ladle of barbecue sauce over it all (plus, you get to watch the sandwich's rapid-fire assembly). The result is reminiscent of how the edges of your food comingle at a paper-plate picnic and create new, yet familiar (and good) flavors. The sweet slaw and barbecue sauce coat the fries without drowning them. Likewise, the hot dog bun never devolves into a soggy mess as you burrow into the heart of the sandwich. Of course, this is fork territory, maybe even a knife. It's messier than the messiest Coney dog you've ever eaten. It's that much tastier, too. 7815 Carnegie Ave., Cleveland, (216) 391-2230

COMFORT LEVEL

Knowing you have two months left of summer vacation

Fried Bologna Sandwich

Lola, \$9

Lola ruined fried bologna. After biting into the thick cut of “cheap” lunch meat, through the egg and the cheddar cheese, through the salty pickle, through the English muffin, you’ll never be able to cook it at home and be satisfied again. Bologna is not normally a meat you want to think about in detail. It’s something you buy because you spent too much somewhere else that week. But at Lola, it has just the right amount of crispy outside and soft center to make you wonder what you’ve been doing wrong at home. The accompanying fries will sop up any of the egg yolk that oozes out. 2058 E. Fourth St., Cleveland, (216) 621-5652, www.lolabistro.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Lunchtime hangover killer



Barney Taxel



Heidi Zaller

Melt Bar & Grilled

Matt Fish's grilled

cheese haven is packed with your memories — from the illuminated plastic snowman over the bar, just like the one dad used to post on the lawn every December, to the practice of presenting the menu on sleeves from old rock albums. “I was trying to create a place where everybody could pick a piece and say ‘I remember that’ or ‘I’ve heard of that’ or ‘that reminds me of being a kid,’ ” says Fish. “I’m really big on remembering the old times and where you’ve been. ... I tried to create memory-joggers into the whole concept.”

And since we know there are a few of you out there for whom staring at an album cover once meant you also had a serious case of the munchies, let’s get to the food. The menu offers 20 variations on the grilled cheese theme. But it’s less the skinny sandwich of your childhood, and more the biggest, monster melt you’ve ever met, with huge slabs of buttery bread holding all the cheese-drenched goodies in between. As Fish puts it, “The [sandwiches] kind of take on a life of their own.”

MUNICIPAL STADIUM MAGIC, \$9

It’s a tailgate party on a plate. Sliced bratwurst, kraut, grilled peppers and American cheese star in this melt that’ll make you feel like pulling your Bernie Kosar jersey out of retirement.

ROASTED VEGETABLE, \$9

Vegetarians don't need to feel left out, even among the many meat-focused sandwiches. This mix of chopped zucchini, eggplant, bell pepper, onion and sun-dried tomato pesto held together by a blanket of havarti cheese makes it a destination dish of its own.

THE PARMAGEDDON, \$9

They're likely to be two of the biggest pierogis you'll ever eat. The giant pouches of potato and cheese are topped with kraut, grilled peppers, onion and Cheddar. It's the weirdest looking sandwich we've seen. But it's what's inside that counts, right?

14718 Detroit Ave., Lakewood (216) 226-3699, www.meltbarandgrilled.com

SWEETS

Comfort Zone Inn on Coventry

The Inn on Coventry lets you know in neon that it has built its reputation on comfort food: the words "Home Cuisine" glow a friendly red in the window. Co-owner Debbie Duirk says almost all the menu's recipes come from the home kitchens of her family and her co-owners. The Inn's legendary Sunday brunch menu is now served all week, but on weekends it's still packed full of bleary-eyed diners getting a sweet start to a lazy weekend day. Amy Haley, 93, co-owner with her daughter, Mary, and Duirk, still makes her beloved orange banana waffles with a secret recipe. "We do scratch cooking here," Mary says. "Everything we make is homemade."

LEMON RICOTTA PANCAKES, \$3.39 FOR ONE, \$4.39 FOR TWO, \$5.39 FOR THREE (10 CENTS LESS ON WEEKDAYS)

The citrus scent of the lemon ricotta pancakes hits you before you even start eating. Don't pour the syrup on, at least not right away — the taste is so sweet, you might not need it. Savoring the lemon, the ricotta cheese, and the way the cheese-fluffed pancake slowly dissolves on your tongue can be more satisfying than maple syrup.



Barney Taxel

BANANA WALNUT FRENCH TOAST, \$4.69 (\$4.99 WEEKDAYS)

Bananas are cooked into the banana walnut French toast, a subtle hint amid the crisp, doughy bread and the occasional crunch of the walnuts. It has all the thick, belly-filling feel of traditional French toast, plus the fresh, healthy contrast of the little banana slices served on top.

HOT TURKEY SANDWICH, \$6.99 (WEEKDAYS ONLY)

You know the Inn's lunchtime hot turkey sandwich is made with care, that the potatoes are mashed in-house and the rich, golden turkey gravy made from scratch, thanks to the lumps. That's a compliment — the starchier spots seem to make the dish more filling, and more like a family recipe whipped up in a kitchen at home, a sign that nothing came from a box or a jar.

2785 Euclid Heights Blvd., Cleveland Heights, (216) 371-1811

Baked Hot Chocolate

Moxie, \$7

Building our first snowman of the winter left our little fingers cold, our noses red and our toes frozen, but we always knew there'd be a cup of steaming hot chocolate waiting for us inside. Chef Jonathan Bennett has translated the classic drink into a cake/soufflé/drink hybrid served in a huge mug. Dig through the layer of frothy whipped cream and break into the rich chocolate cake/soufflé to expose hot chocolate underneath just begging to keep you warm. The soothing steam that rolls off the dessert will help you defrost or destress and get you ready to brave the elements again. 3355 Richmond Road, Beachwood, (216) 831-5599, www.moxietherestaurant.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Kicking off your boots after a long, hard day

Coconut Bread Pudding

Lelolai Bakery & Café, \$1.50

If a wool blanket were edible — work with us here — it would be the coconut bread pudding at Ohio City's Lelolai Bakery & Café. Each slab is dense with a residual hint of fluffiness, woven tightly from cream, eggs, bread, cinnamon and just a gentle hint of the promised coconut. It's studded with nubby raisins that provide not only a texture shift, but also microbursts of sweetness, a contrast to the just-mildly-sweet (and better for it) bread. 1889 W. 25th St., Ohio City, (216) 771-9956, www.lelolaibakery.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Curling up with a thick blanket on a cold night

Apple Pie

Mom's Diner, \$3.79

If the laugh-tracked din of the '80s sitcom "Alice" still lives somewhere in the back of your Nick@Nite-loving brain, you've likely longed to grab a booth at Mel's Diner. Well, Orange Village has a place with colorful servers, a slate of regulars and a chalkboard filled with the day's specials, and it's called (appropriately enough) Mom's Diner. We visited for a warm slice of the all-American classic, apple pie. Packed with cinnamon, fresh apples and a chewy, flavorful crust, it's the type of dish that could even melt Mel's heart. 28149 Miles Road, Orange Village, (440) 248-6669

COMFORT LEVEL

A lazy evening on the couch watching your favorite reruns

The Carnival

Three Birds, \$7

Some believe the pinnacle of any festival experience are the rides and the games. But we remember tugging on Dad's hand through the lines, anxious for a taste of the most exalted of all fair foods: the funnel cake. Three Birds harnesses that sticky-fingered childish bliss with its Carnival dessert. A fresh, hot funnel cake arrives accompanied by frozen chocolate bananas rolled in peanuts. Goopy caramel sauce and chantilly cream complete the experience, catering in a very grown-up way to our favorite childhood dreams. 18515 Detroit Ave., Lakewood, (216) 221-3500, www.3birdsrestaurant.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes you feel like fireworks on the Fourth of July

ETHNIC

Mayo Lamb Stew

Nighttown, \$10

A mound of mashed potatoes vies for your attention — all buttery and light against the rich colors of the lamb stew. Like your little brother who always sang on the way to your ballet recital, it cannot be ignored. Nighttown owner and native Irishman Brendan Ring told us poor families in Ireland made a version of this dish by stewing the mutton of shorn sheep. “Now that they have a few bucks in their pocket, they use lamb,” he says. Braised in Guinness, the meat is earthy and tender, the vegetables are firm and the potatoes are pure velvet. Little brother, this will make your taste buds dance. *12387 Cedar Road, Cleveland Heights, (216) 795-0550, www.nighttowncleveland.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

The lilt of a bartender’s Irish brogue



Michael Cavotta

Wiener Schnitzel

Donauschwaben German-American Cultural Center, \$9.75

Step off the train anywhere between Munich and Vienna, walk to the first Gasthof, or restaurant, you see and open the menu. There will be Wiener schnitzel. Step into the German Club and you can duplicate the experience — the schnitzel is made from fresh veal, fried on the spot and served with lemon wedges. Both crispy and tender, there’s nothing but the jolt of citrus to interfere. *7370 Columbia Road, Olmsted Township, (440) 235-2646, www.donauschwabencleveland.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes us want to watch “The Sound of Music.”

Pho Hoa

Superior Pho, \$6.95

It’s the hamburger of Vietnam and the country’s most popular dish. Pho, a Vietnamese beef soup with rice noodles and cilantro, is southeast Asia’s best comfort-food export. Our favorite is the pho hoa (stew with rare beef) served in giant meal-sized bowls. It’s totally unlike any American beef soup, with a clear, subtle broth, a mix of the steak’s flavor and cilantro, with a sweet, soft tang. *3030 Superior Ave., Cleveland, (216) 781-7462*

COMFORT LEVEL

A reminder of your Ramen Noodles-as a-food-group phase

Bi Bim Bob

Seoul Hot Pot, \$7.95

Bi bim bob is a popular dish in South Korea that Korean college students in the States eat to remedy homesickness. Stir-fried beef and several vegetables are arranged on white rice with a fried egg on top. You can mix them together with red-pepper paste, as Koreans do, to heat it up, or sample each ingredient individually. It’s an exotic sampler that turns into a filling meal stimulating all parts of the tongue. *3709 Payne Ave., Cleveland; (216) 881-1221*

COMFORT LEVEL

A postcard from a traveling friend

Shish Tawook

Taza: A Lebanese Grill, \$16.95

Since the United States is a young country, you have to cross the ocean to find food that speaks to our ancient souls. Taza serves up this romantic sense of history on a platter, and calls it shish tawook. The chicken-and-rice most of us are used to enjoying in the form of casseroles gets back to its roots: charred pieces of chicken bearing kebab holes nestle against green peppers, tomatoes and onions, and rice pilaf garnished with cinnamon. *28601 Chagrin Blvd., Woodmere, (216) 464-4000*

COMFORT LEVEL

Hanging out at a bonfire with friends

Potato Pancakes

Alvie and Gary's Jack's Deli and Restaurant, 3 for \$6.99 There's nothing not to love about potato pancakes: The mere scent of them can harken Hanukkah as much as a turkey pulled fresh from the oven conjures Thanksgiving. Jack's Deli's take arrives nearly too hot to touch, but you'll have a tough time holding back. See the way they crumble as you cut? That's freshness, kids. Smear some sour cream and applesauce onto each bite, relax and repeat. *14490 Cedar Road, University Heights, (216) 382-5350, www.jacksdeliandrestaurant.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Catching that first snowflake on your tongue

Lomo de Res en Chile de Arbol

Mi Pueblo, \$11.95

Spice — tangy, earthy, layered spice culminating in a four-alarm blaze — is exotic to most Midwestern palates, but tastes just like home for those from closer to the equator. The lomo de res en chile de arbol is a rich stew of long-simmered, thin-sliced rib eye steak in thick, brown chili pepper gravy with sides of rice, beans and tortillas to help cool the palate. *11611 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, (216) 791-8226*

COMFORT LEVEL

No-worry days at the beach with a Corona in hand

Comfort Zone

Frank Sterle's Slovenian Country House

If you order the family-style meal here, you can expect to be treated like a relative. You'll get a small taste of some of the best food on the menu: Wiener schnitzel, roast pork and sausage, with sauerkraut, vegetables and potatoes on the side. Soup and salad come beforehand. And of course, it isn't a meal without strudel for dessert, served with coffee.



Heidi Zaller

But these portions aren't teeny. And this isn't a typical restaurant. This is Margot Glinski's place, and she'll often jump in to take a few tables. You can't help but smile at her quips flavored with her German accent. "Mmm, this sauerkraut is excellent. Is it homemade?" we ask. She looks hurt. Of course it is. Everything is homemade.

After working our way through our mounds of meat, delighting in every bite, she just shakes her head. She's not sure she should bring us our strudel, she says. We didn't finish our vegetables.

WEINER SCHNITZEL, \$14.95 OR PART OF THE \$16.95 FAMILY-STYLE MEAL

The tender veal has a crisp breading that even the tasty gravy won't make soggy. The relaxed atmosphere will allow you to dip some mashed potatoes on your fork when grabbing the meat, just like at home. Just keep your elbows off the table.

KLOBASE AND ZELJE (SAUSAGE AND SAUERKRAUT), \$11.25

Sometimes sauerkraut really needs its meat, and acts like more of a condiment. Here, it's good enough to eat

by itself. Your teeth will snap through the crisp sausage casing to a soft, gristle-free meat. It's the kind of meat you have to tip the butcher to get: Just the right amount of smoky, salty and spicy.

STRUDEL, \$3.50

You're not going to want to order the strudel. The other meals are so filling. But if you get talked into a bite, you'll eat the entire flaky thing yourself. In proper European style, you can really taste the apples as it's not overly sweet.

1401 E. 55th St., Cleveland, (216) 881-4181, www.sterlescountryhouse.com

PIEROGIES

Lamb and Goat Cheese Pierogi

M Bistro, \$12.95

Whenever we have lamb, there's always something to celebrate — an anniversary, promotion or a holiday. But even if we have an average day at the office and there is no occasion on our calendar, the lamb and goat cheese pierogi can change all that. Topped with frizzled onions and tzatziki (a Greek cucumber yogurt sauce) instead of sour cream and butter, this average Cleveland meal is transformed into something to celebrate any day you'd like. 23800 Detroit Road, Westlake, (440) 250-5550, www.mbistro.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Coming home to a surprise birthday party



Michael Cavotta

Potato and Cheese Pierogi

Marta's Restaurant, \$6.95

You know a pierogi is done right when you hesitate to dip your fork in the sour cream before biting in. Marta's Restaurant in Euclid will prepare the dish steamed, deep fried or pan fried, accommodating anyone's favorite style. The filling is the best part of any pierogi, and these have just the right balance of cheese and potato, but the cooked dough is what makes these special. The pan-fried pierogis have a crisp outside yet stay tender and moist on the inside. If that doesn't remind you of home cooking, a lingering Marta by the kitchen door will, as she's often watched us take our first bites, and remembers regular patrons, if not by name, by favorite dish. 800 E. 222nd St., Euclid, (216) 731-9596, www.martasrestaurant.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Will make you forget about that speeding ticket

Traditional Pierogi

Sokolowski's University Inn, 5 for \$8.95

Sokolowski's has been serving up the most comforting of comfort foods since before it was called comfort food. In-the-know Clevelanders come here for their fix of stuffed cabbage and chicken paprikash and kielbasa. But for the ultimate indulgence, it doesn't get any better than the pierogis. They're presented on your plate in a bath of butter-and-onion goodness. The pierogis themselves are thoroughly tender, with a tasty touch of caramelization on the top of each one. Bite in, and the onion-infused butter melts into the filling, which uses the divine ratio of potato to cheese. Dab a little sour cream onto these pierogis, and you'll be glad you live in Cleveland, no matter if your family's roots are in Krakow or Cairo. 1201 University Road, Tremont, (216) 771-9236, www.sokolowskis.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes you ready for a post-meal nap, no matter what's on your mind

Pierogies

Rocky River Brewing Co., \$7.99

Remember the mashed potato volcano you used to make on Thanksgiving — gravy pooled in the middle just waiting to be released with your first forkful? Yeah, these pierogies are like that. Goopy molten American cheese tops a mound of potato filling and oozes out when you get through the crisped doughy dumpling. With caramelized onion and grilled bratwurst (and a pint of Cooper's Gold Kolsch ale), it's something to be thankful for. 21290 Center Ridge Road, Rocky River, (440) 895-2739, www.rockyriverbrewco.com

COMFORT LEVEL

SOUP

Sweet Corn and Potato Chowder

Fahrenheit, \$6

Fahrenheit's sweet corn and potato chowder reads like a slice of country cottage life, an image that comes alive at the stove of chef Rocco Whalen. His creation is a satisfying shade of taupe married with earthy browns, rather than the Technicolor hues we've seen in the canned varieties. It's a bit thinner than we expected a chowder to be, but dense with bite-size chunks of potato and firm (not mushy) kernels of corn. On close inspection, the corn actually bears some dark-colored roasting scars. The flavors pop as if the garden were out back, and Whalen surprises with a tart finish (we surmised sour cream). It'll leave you guessing and wanting more. *2417 Professor Ave., Tremont, (216) 781-8858,*

www.fahrenheittremont.com

COMFORT LEVEL

A love note from that summer you spent backpacking around Europe

Pulled Chicken Noodle Soup

The Souper Market, \$3 for 8 ounces

Chicken noodle soup is so classic, so American. It's the go-to for those who are under the weather. The look, the smell, the taste is so ingrained in our society that when we came across this particular one, we had to ask, "Why is it red?" The answer: Chunks of tomato mix with celery and lengths of pulled chicken to give the broth its reddish tint. But don't mistake it for a tomato soup — it's still 100 percent chicken noodle. It's still warm, soothing and chunky, and made us feel better. *14809 Detroit Ave., Lakewood, (216) 712-7292, www.thesoupermarket.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes you forget there's two feet of snow outside

Black Bean Chili

Tommy's, \$5.19 If the '70s-era clan from "The Electric Company" ever met up for dinner with The Bloodhound Gang (from "3-2-1 Contact") in Cleveland, the odds are good you'd find them hunkered down over black bean chili at Tommy's (those counterculture kids would love the vibe — wood paneling, plants galore and tons of tofu). The simple brown crock of meat-free chili is laden with beans, peppers and onions — so many beans, in fact, that it takes on the color of a rich stew, rather than the tomato-red chili we're used to. It's the kind of slow-simmered, kitchen-sink, Earth Day chili we would've made with our mom, back in '81, before home computers and cable TV and everything fast. *1824 Coventry Road, Cleveland Heights, (216) 321-7757, www.tommyscoventry.com*

COMFORT LEVEL

Like curling up on the couch with A Prayer for Owen Meany during a thunderstorm

Matzoh Ball Soup

It's It Deli, \$6.25 for a quart

OK, we know recommending a Matzoh ball soup can be dangerous territory, and that no place is better than your bubbe's kitchen. We also want to acknowledge we chose a place on the West Side. But it is a deli, not a restaurant, so hear us out: It's It Deli has the goods. The strong, but not too-salty, broth provides the perfect backdrop for soft vegetables that add texture and color. The matzoh ball is hearty and smooth, sticking together until that first spoonful, and then it starts to crumble into delicious bits, incorporated throughout the soup. *11520 Clifton Blvd., Cleveland, (216) 651-3078*

COMFORT LEVEL

Makes a cold seem totally surmountable

Tomato Basil Bisque

Molinari's, \$5

It may arrive beautifully arranged. But chef Randal Johnson knows your inner child is calling and you are dying to get in there and mess it all up. It's OK. Go ahead. He wants it that way. Once you are done mixing the croutes (wide, thin crouton slices) and Asiago cheese into the bath of Italian plum tomatoes, sautéed onions and garlic, you'll have a very tasty version of grilled cheese and tomato soup in a bowl. But unlike the crayons and paint messes of your childhood, this you can eat. And you will — every bit of it. 8900 Mentor Ave., Mentor, (440) 974-2750, www.molinaris.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Jumping into a pile of leaves on a brisk, autumn day

Grilled Cheese and Tomato Soup

Crave, \$3 for a cup, \$4 for a bowl

The name is misleading in the brainteaser way: The grilled cheese doesn't accompany the soup, it is the soup. Or half of it, at least. In a stunningly modern presentation, a thick, tangy, brick-red ladleful of tomato soup nestles side-by-side, yin-and-yang style, with a creamy, zesty, perfectly smooth complement of cheddar cheese soup topped with thin, crispy, bread-slice shaped croutons. Dip your spoon into either side to appreciate the grown-up flavor nuances, or let the kid in you swirl orange into red like a new box of watercolors. 57 E.

Market St., Akron, (330) 253-1234, www.eatdrinkcrave.com

COMFORT LEVEL

Re-reading the same book of brainteasers for the 20th time



Brad Ronevich