Who Doesn’t Like Comfort Food?

I want to read about other people’s comfort foods about as much as I want to read about their favorite brands of toothpaste.

Last February, the San Francisco Bay Guardian asked me to contribute a column about food writing for Lit, the newspaper’s monthly literary supplement. Given the grey skies and icy patches that define New England winter, I thought first of comfort, but what flowed from my pen surprised me. Anyway, now that the sun is again high in the sky, I thought I’d share my thoughts here, in a version of the essay that originally appeared in the San Francisco Bay Guardian.

A pervasive new trend in food writing now threatens to eclipse all others, and there’s no relief in sight. This trend is “comfort.” It’s a tricky subject, precisely because the word—not to mention the idea—is so emotionally charged. After all, who doesn’t like comfort food? I certainly do. It’s creamy tapioca for me, especially the large pearl kind, so I can pop the beads between my teeth. But just because I need comfort like everyone else doesn’t mean that I want comfort screaming out at me from every page. Comfort is, after all, a private thing, 9/11 notwithstanding. When food magazines hype “comfort,” aren’t they just capitalizing on the national trauma, trivializing our fears by reducing them to cravings for macaroni and cheese? What comforts me definitely does no good for many of my fellow Americans, whose stomachs churn at the mere thought of creamy tapioca (they’d call it “gloppy”) and whose forms of self-solace reach far deeper into loneliness than any of these food articles would acknowledge. We may be in this national crisis together, but we face our midnight dreads individually, apart from the public audience of consumers. So I want to read about other people’s comfort foods about as much as I want to read about their favorite brands of toothpaste.

Even if we decide not to look at the magazines or newspapers, it’s hard to avoid the association between comfort and food. In the aftermath of terror, the more the world intrudes, the more we hunker down to keep it at bay. In fact, polls show that people are again making meals at home. This is a good thing, an affirmation of all that eating should be—the sharing of bounty and the creation of
true community. Two of the best-selling cookbooks at Amazon.com promise a return to the table, which in our hectic lives we apparently left behind. These books teach us how to bring family and friends together to share our food. The table represents all that is solid and true; it offers a kind of salvation in our increasingly fragile world. But haven’t we had enough stories about the special allure of childhood foods, of simmering soups and savory meals by the fire? Why don’t we try to engage with the world instead of retreating from it? Why not publish articles on Afghan foods and traditions, or on our own government’s attempts to serve “culturally appropriate” meals to the Taliban prisoners at Guantánamo Bay by giving them peanut butter instead of pork?

If, however, we still need to seek comfort in what we claim as our own foods, our own traditions, we must try to avoid saccharine prose. And we should make every effort not to indulge in our twin national obsessions by moralizing about the importance of eating rationally only minutes after we’ve described the great comfort to be had from a rich chocolate cake topped with smooth vanilla ice cream smothered in a hot fudge sauce so lush that the ice cream begins to melt . . . Let’s face it: most comfort foods are, by definition, naughty—part of their pleasure derives from the fact that these foods often taste best on the sly. If we have to talk about comfort, we should look openly at its needy, self-indulgent side, and not just at its nurturing qualities. Finding consolation means filling an empty space whose roots reach deep into the psyche. The problems begin when this emptiness becomes literal—when it’s expressed as the need for comfort through food, as evidenced by the prevalence of eating disorders in our society.

Food writers, like all good writers, have an obligation to make their subject new. That means exploring the subject fully, turning it inside out to reveal its most hidden parts. We must describe food in new ways, by writing about what’s most important: whether delight, or abhorrence, or concern at what’s happening along the food chain. Let’s look closely at the components of a dish and not just admire its surface beauty. Where did the ingredients come from? What traditions lie behind it? We may at times have to get down and dirty and reveal some unappetizing things, the sort of things we don’t like to think about (slaughter, for instance) in our all-too-often-thoughtless consumption. But if we truly confront our food instead of just gaze upon it, our rewards will be many. Eating in an informed way ultimately connects us with our history and our culture. Once we realize that others before us have eaten as we do, once we begin to imagine ourselves in their places, then this understanding should, in some small way, bring us the comfort that we otherwise so blithely seek.