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Comfort food and comfortable franchisees

In uncertain times—or even when the weather turns—restaurants see high demand for the traditional and familiar

By *Julie Bennett*

In a foodie culture dominated by quinoa, nitrogen-infused desserts and five-minute pizzas, it's pot roast, cinnamon bread and homemade tomato soup that still provide comfort to consumers and to the restaurant franchisees who serve them.

"Our sales go up immediately when the weather turns cool and rainy," says John Cahill, president of la Madeleine Cafés—an 88-unit fast-casual chain with a French bakery theme, based in Dallas.

"We're constantly changing our menu, but when the weather turns, guests gather around our fireplaces and order the staples we've served for over 30 years, like Tomato Basil Soup, Caesar Salad and Strawberries Romanoff."

AMBIENCE

Dallas resident Deepen Patel says, "I was a fan of la Madeleine's comfortable ambience and food for years before becoming a franchisee in 2014. Each of our four la Madeleines in Texas, and two in Oklahoma, feels like a home away from home."

Darren Tristano, chief insights officer of Technomic, a food-service research and consulting firm in Chicago, says, "Comfort foods have found increasing consumer appeal due to familiarity and affordability. Although many



GREAT HARVEST

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GARY COPELAND

Great Harvest Bread Company, left, mills its own wheat to bake bread; The Melting Pot makes a ritual of fondue.

millennial foodies continue to crave new, more adventurous ingredients and flavors, the majority of consumers continue to find their favorite

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affordable foods at family-style restaurants where meat and potatoes continue to feed mainstream America."

"If we didn't have our traditional fried chicken and from-scratch mashed potatoes on our buffet for some reason, we'd be bombarded with customer complaints,"

says Dave Gronewoller, of Winston-Salem, N.C., a nine-unit Golden Corral franchisee, who's been with the Raleigh-based company for 37 years. Other items on the chain's list of Ten Core Comfort Foods are pot roast cooked for 12 hours, meatloaf, and carrot cake.

At the Great Harvest Bread Company bakery in Northville, Mich., the product customers seek in times of stress is cinnamon bread, say franchisees David and Julie Cole, who left careers in banking to buy the unit in 2002. "Our old-fashioned offerings make customers feel at home. We know most of them by name," says Mrs. Cole. "There's even a group that comes in every Saturday morning to watch David bake. And our kids grew up here."

Customers at The Melting Pot, 123 fondue restaurants that started in 1975, may crave

melted cheese, but they also find comfort in the ritual of cooking their meals at the table. Mike Lester, president of The Melting Pot, a niche-brand under the management of Front Burner in Tampa, Fla., says, "It's not uncommon for a couple to get engaged at one of our restaurants and come back for every anniversary."

COMING BACK

Franchisee Jeff Nichols, who has operated a Melting Pot in Wilmington, Del., since 1994, and is a partner in four more, says, "We just celebrated with one guest who was making her 100th visit. I think people keep coming back because fondue rekindles relationships. You can't cook and write emails, and you have to engage with everyone at the table."

Serving comfort food in restaurants with a long history

also creates comfortable franchisees. Bob McDevitt, Golden Corral's senior vice president of franchise development, says, "We have 160 franchisees operating 490 restaurants and at least 25 of them have been around for 15 years—and they're still opening more units."

Mr. Gronewoller reveals that he tried to open restaurants with a couple of new franchisers of trendy concepts, but those ventures didn't work out.

"Now I'm just building more units with Golden Corral—they've done quite well for decades and will be around for many more."

BAKING BREAD

Mike Ferretti, CEO of the Great Harvest Bread Company, in Dillon, Mont., says most of that concept's 225 franchisees "fell in love with how we mill our own wheat and bake our bread. Some of them have been with us since the 1980s and are getting ready to retire."

Mr. Cole reports that revenues from the couple's Great Harvest franchise have replaced their corporate salaries "and made us very comfortable."

"We are in a unique position of being able to nourish our community with a hearty welcome, warm wholesome food and a happy vibe," says Mrs. Cole.

Julie Bennett is a freelance writer specializing in franchising matters.