

TURNING POINTS

What Comfort Food Looks Like to People Around the World

Six people who turned their love for food into careers tell us about the flavors that nourish their souls.

By Ilaria Parogni

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This is an article from Turning Points, a special section that explores what critical moments from this year might mean for the year ahead.

As the coronavirus pandemic thrust us into the unknown and confined us to our homes, the time many of us spent in the kitchen grew exponentially. We baked sourdough and banana breads, tested the capabilities of our Dutch ovens and concocted elaborate meals, all in search of distraction, solace and a sense of normality. Our actions were the manifestation of a simple truth: Food can nourish our souls as much as our bodies. After all, who hasn't turned to cake in a time of sadness, or felt the joy a favorite dish can bring?

We asked six people who know plenty about the power of food to tell us about the flavors dear to their hearts. The responses have been lightly edited for clarity.



Lauren Tamaki

Pandan Cake

When I was little, my younger brother and I would meet our half brother in London's Chinatown, and I would always ask to go to a bakery to get some pandan cake, a fragrant green sponge that is as fluffy as a cloud. I would try to resist eating it for as long as possible — the longer I waited, the longer I could imagine what it'd be like to taste it. Once I'd finish the cake, it could be a long time before I'd be back to have it again.

The tradition carries on to this day. Whenever I am back in Chinatown, I make a point of picking up pandan cake. The bakeries are always noisy and busy, but that's what makes them familiar and comforting. And I still savor the slices of cake like I used to. My partner, Nabil, pointed out that I have a ritual when I eat sweet treats: I'll tear off a piece, carefully place it on my knee and then wait until I can no longer resist eating it. I do it because I feel comforted by the fact that the cake is there waiting, just like it always has.

— Kim-Joy Hewlett, cookbook author and former contestant in “The Great British Baking Show”



Lauren Tamaki

Mollete

In Mexico City, the word “mollete” stands for a bolillo — a Mexican bread roll, crunchy on the outside, soft and warm on the inside — that is sliced in half, smeared in butter and loaded with refried beans and cheese. It’s usually oven-toasted until the cheese melts gently and served with pico de gallo.

You can find molletes topped with chorizo, ham, slow-roasted pork or even chilaquiles: The bolillo works as vehicle and substance. But nothing beats plain molletes. When I was growing up, Wednesday was “Mollete Day” in my school’s cafeteria. The molletes they served were legendary. After recess, the entire classroom smelled like butter and pico de gallo.

Mollete’s real power lies in its domestic quaintness: a warm, simple, cheap but perfect balance of textures and flavors. When I am abroad — homesick, full of nostalgia — I miss molletes. Savoring one would mean being home with my parents, my wife and my dog. Even though you could have this humble open-faced sandwich any day of the week, as a child I used to ask my mom for molletes on my birthday instead of cake. Sometimes, I still do.

— Pedro Reyes, food writer and creative director of Paladar, a Mexican company devoted to the development of culinary projects and experiences



Lauren Tamaki

Plantain

For as long as I can remember, the plantain has given me joy and comfort. When I was a child, growing up in Ghana, my mother found many ways of bringing this food to our family table. Green, unripe plantain was boiled and eaten with cooked greens. It was fried in thin slices and served lightly salted, our version of potato chips. A few days later, plantains would be roasting on an open fire, to be later eaten alongside peanuts in a perfect snack locally known as Kofi Brokeman — an economical bite that just about anyone could afford.

And if we didn't have the time to set up the grill? We would boil the plantain and serve it with peanut soup. We missed that window and the plantains were a little on the soft side? We cut them up, seasoned them with chile and ginger, and fried them up; we call this dish kelewele. We had totally forgotten about them and they had turned black? We would blend them with onion and spices and make tatale, plantain fritters to go with stewed beans. Plantain, oh how I love thee, let me count the ways. ...

— Selassie Atadika, chef and founder of Midunu, a Ghanaian food enterprise offering dining experiences and artisanal chocolates



Lauren Tamaki

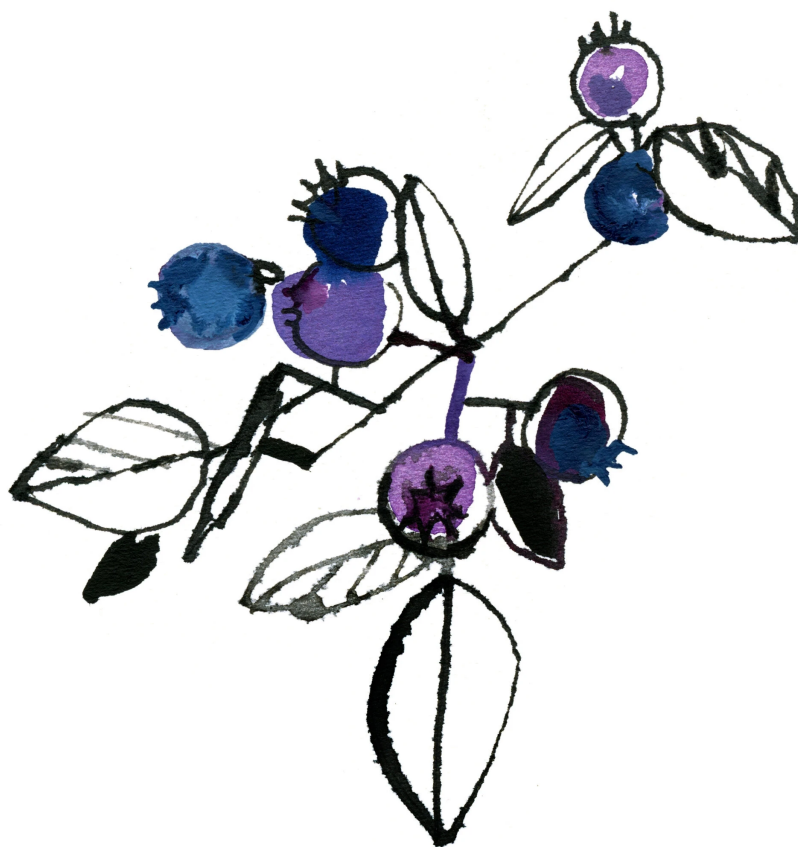
Katsu Sando

I have always been fascinated by what happens when Eastern and Western cultures meet, especially in food. A katsu sando shows how good the results can be. While the sandwich is a very British concept, the katsu sando, with its panko-breaded meat filling, is very Japanese. As a kid, I always thought sandos — whether they were made with pork, chicken or my favorite, Wagyu beef — tasted luxurious and indulgent. They are also easy to eat in one bite.

A sando usually comes with a mixture including ketchup, honey and Worcestershire sauce, a British condiment that became common in Japan in the 19th century, as relations with Britain grew closer. The result is a sublime Japanified sandwich. As is often the case in Japanese cuisine and culture, when we import something, we like to create our take on it.

As a chef, I have a deep appreciation for street food, and my cooking is heavily inspired by it. It is a simple yet blissful way of eating. And when I eat a street food delicacy like the sando, I am reminded of the way food is a global language that brings us together.

— Hisato Hamada, executive chef and co-founder of the Japanese restaurant brand Wagyumafia



Lauren Tamaki

Wild Blueberries

During childhood walks in northern Minnesota with my Dakota mother, she would point out the uses of the plants we would find along the way. She never used the word “weed,” because everything has a history and place in our lives. She would constantly grab stalks off the ground and pop them in her mouth, saying something like, “This can ease the pain of a toothache” or “My father used to ask my sisters and me to collect this when it came up in the spring!”

Whenever I see a patch of wild blueberries, which grow prolifically up north, I am reminded of those moments. Nothing in the world tastes better to me than those tiny bursts of flavor. I immediately gather them in my shirt. Right there in the woods, I savor

them in my mouth, and when I do, I feel a sense of connection to the land around me. My chest is filled with the memories of being loved and nourished, of having a shared experience, not only with my mom, but with the land itself.

— Dana Thompson, Indigenous food activist and founder of The Sioux Chef, a project dedicated to the revitalization of Native American cuisine



Lauren Tamaki

Za'atar Manousheh

A piping hot za'atar manousheh, fresh out of the oven, is by far my favorite comfort food, a soft and fluffy flatbread boosted by za'atar, a crunchy and acidic spice mix. It's so easy to make, and it is packed with Lebanese flavors and memories. I like to top mine with my grandmother's za'atar mixture, one that she has been perfecting for 55 years.

Manousheh reminds me of beautiful times spent at home with my family, at school, at work or out with friends. At some point I started feeling the need to share that comforting feeling with people all over the world. That is why I chose to learn the art of making manousheh.

In Lebanon, manousheh is as common as coffee, and it is traditionally enjoyed for breakfast. For all of us, 5 a.m. is manousheh o'clock. That is when bakers all over Lebanon start their day to make sure the nation's favorite breakfast is ready for its people. It brings me so much joy to be one of those bakers!

— Teya Mikhael, a baker at The Lebanese Bakery in Beirut

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