

One-dish eateries aim to be simply delicious

Pizza parlors? Think macaroni and cheese, meatballs and more

By Natalie Ermann Russell
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By 5:30 on any given night, on a gritty neighborhood block of 40th Street in Oakland, hungry patrons queue up at the cozy hipster restaurant Homeroom. On the menu? Macaroni and cheese, served 10 different ways. There's the cheddar version with hot dog bits and crushed potato chips; the option with Point Reyes blue cheese and walnuts; and the one made with goat cheese and scallions. Oh, and then you can add mix-ins like bacon, broccoli or a fried egg.

"There are pizza restaurants, burger places, ice cream shops — so the question was, 'Why not a mac-and-cheese restaurant?'" says Erin Wade, who along with Allison Arevalo are the owners of Homeroom. "Given that macaroni and cheese is the best food on earth, we couldn't figure out why there weren't entire restaurants already dedicated to it."

Indeed, this staple is one of our country's favorites. As are meatballs, grilled cheese, hot dogs, baked potatoes, even cereal. What these all have in common is that they're worthy of being a one-name wonder, the only dish on a restaurant's menu.

Granted, that one dish is served up in multiple forms. In Washing-

ton, D.C.'s Penn Quarter, for instance, renowned chef Michel Richard's new fast-casual restaurant, Meatballs, presents said item in its classic iteration with beef, or made with lamb, chicken, crab or lentils. "People grew up on meatballs," says manager Jonathan Theriault. "They know what it tastes like, it's simple — they're comfortable with it."

That's precisely what many of these single-dish restaurants have in common. For the most part, they're peddling comfort food. "We are going through a number of crises as a country," says Rupert Spies, senior lecturer at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. "And what you look for in times of stress is something that comforts you, something you're familiar with."

Another common thread is that these one-dish restaurants tend to pop up in densely populated areas, where there are enough people to make a go of it. Because after all, Spies says, how many nights in a month would you go somewhere with such a narrow menu?

The model, though, pays off for other reasons. "You don't need a ton of equipment," Spies says. "Forecasting what dishes will be popular isn't an issue because you have a limited number of

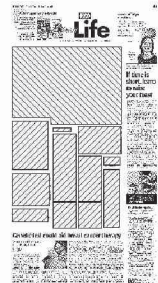
ingredients. If you have a diverse menu, all that inventory is expensive and labor-intensive. But if what you have is just basically pasta, it's not as challenging."

At Homeroom, the approach pays off for customers. "We take a great deal of pride in the fact that even though we use local and artisanal ingredients, everything on our menu is under \$10, and we intend to keep it that way," Wade says. "Mac and cheese should always be affordable."

A pu-pu platter of one-dish restaurants

Where to find exciting variations on some singular sensations.

- ▶ **Baked potato:**
The Baked Potato
(Studio City, Calif.)
www.thebakedpotato.com
- ▶ **Cereal:**
Cereality (Dallas)
www.cereality.com
- ▶ **Grilled cheese:**
Chedd's
(Austin; Eau Claire, Wis.; Sioux Falls, S.D.)
www.chedds.com
- ▶ **Hot dogs:**
Crif Dogs
(New York City)
www.crifdogs.com
- ▶ **Macaroni and cheese:**
Homeroom
(Oakland)
www.homeroom510.com
- ▶ **Meatballs:**
Meatballs
(Washington, D.C.)
(no website yet)
- ▶ **Peanut butter:**
PBandU (Wayne, Penn.)
www.pbandu.com





Photos by Dan Jung

That's using the ol' noodle: Allison Arevalo, left, and Erin Wade are the owners of Oakland's Homeroom, which specializes in one item: macaroni and cheese.



All under \$10: Home-room's focus on mac and cheese keeps costs low, thus attracting lots of customers.



Find Homeroom's Trailer Mac recipe online at recipes.usatoday.com.