Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

CONNECTION

Pickleball

Popular sport sweeps East Texas

MONEY-SAVING APPS

COMFORT FOOD

NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION

RURAL CONNECTIONS

By Shirley Bloomfield, CEO
NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

An Ongoing Mission

NTCA supports rural broadband

As we begin a new year, our NTCA members are on my mind, specifically how they do so much to create a better tomorrow by deploying and sustaining reliable broadband networks that connect rural communities to the world.

We've come a long way since the creation of NTCA in 1954, and I wanted to start 2025 with a reminder—or possibly an introduction—to who we are and how we serve the people who work so hard for you.

We represent about 850 independent, family-owned and community-based rural telecommunications companies. Without NTCA members, many communities would continue to be left behind by larger, national internet providers. So, we strive to advance policies that help these companies close the digital divide. This includes supporting programs like the Universal Service Fund, which helps rural consumers get and stay connected to high-quality, affordable internet.

I'm proud to note how well our NTCA members do their jobs. The robust and reliable broadband they provide enables businesses to connect to customers, doctors to patients and teachers to students. And the work they do in their communities goes beyond providing internet service. Many host digital literacy classes, sponsor STEM and esports initiatives at schools, support economic development initiatives and so much more.

In short, NTCA members are dedicated to improving the communities they serve.

As we enter a new year, we continue to support our members as they work to make your lives the best they can be.

HIDDEN CONNECTIONS

BROADBAND NETWORKS SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

Your fast, reliable internet connection links you to the internet, bringing you a seemingly endless number of services. Whether you enjoy streaming entertainment, gaming, video calls and more, this essential service adapts to your needs.

Did you know, however, that same network may also underpin a range of other services essential to your community? While the specifics may vary from place to place, fast internet networks create a foundation for rural America.

PUBLIC SAFETY

The communications systems serving first responders often rely on high-speed internet.

EDUCATION

School systems send large amounts of data and offer classrooms access to online resources.

GOVERNMENT

From informational websites and apps to the computer networks and databases needed to operate, local governments require excellent connectivity.

HEALTH CARE

Whether transmitting medical records or for telehealth visits, medical providers increasingly rely on digital tools.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Fast broadband networks provide a community resource attractive to both businesses and homebuyers, creating a keystone for growth.

A Safe Place to Stay

Isaiah House provides comfort for foster children

Photo courtesy of Corey Paulson

Television host Mike Rowe, center, surprises Isaiah 117 House co-founder Ronda Paulson and her family for a taping of his Facebook show "Returning the Favor."

Story by MELANIE JONES

When Ronda and Corey Paulson met their first foster child at the back door of the Carter County, Tennessee, Department of Children's Services, he was wearing too-small pajamas. The clothes he was wearing when he was removed from his unsuitable home were filthy, and DCS was unable to provide any that fit him properly.

The 9-month-old was fortunate the couple could come get him quickly. Some foster children spend hours—if not days—at overwhelmed and understaffed DCS offices, sometimes sleeping on the floor.

That situation has begun to change, however, thanks to a far-reaching program the Paulsons were inspired to establish in 2018. Thanks to word of mouth and a 2020 feature by "Dirty Jobs" host Mike Rowe on his Facebook page, their effort is spreading nationwide.

When the couple took the baby boy, Isaiah, home they lavished him with love and everything else an infant could need. But the Paulsons couldn't stop thinking about something they learned in their foster-parenting classes—the DCS office is usually the only place for a child to go on removal day.

They thought of little Isaiah. And they started studying the Bible's book of Isaiah, including part of one verse in particular, Isaiah 1:17, which calls on people to "take up the cause of the fatherless."

Then they thought, "What if there was a home?" Corey says.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT

So, that's what they set out to create. Ronda put together a board and worked with the local DCS office to come up with a workable concept. They raised money, bought a house and renovated it to DCS specifications. They painted the door red, and they called it Isaiah 117 House.

The house provides space for DCS workers who now bring children there instead of an office building. Children and teens have access to baths and showers. They get brand-new clean clothes and toys. They have beds to sleep in if the placement takes more than a few hours. Volunteers cook them nutritious meals and comfort food.

That was 2018, and it was supposed to be one and done. "Clearly, we've learned that God had other plans," Corey says.

Word of mouth spread. Soon neighboring Tennessee counties wanted their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Then, in 2020, Ronda and the Isaiah 117 House were featured on Mike Rowe's Facebook show "Returning the Favor." Two million people saw that episode on March 9, 2020. Then the calls really started coming in. Corey says they heard from people in 41 states and four countries wanting to start their own Isaiah 117 Houses. Now about 30 are open and more are in the works across 12 states.

"On March 13, the world shut down," Corey says of the COVID-19 pandemic. "But our mission kept growing. We say Mike Rowe and Jesus are building houses for children."

LEARN MORE

Interested in learning more about Isaiah 117 House or how to establish one in your area? Visit isaiah117house.com.

Ringing in the New Year

Celebrating 2024's accomplishments and looking forward to 2025

Happy New Year! I hope you had a wonderful holiday season and enjoyed your time with friends and family. Now, we're at a moment for contemplating all we achieved in 2024 and resolving to achieve new goals in the next 12 months.

RUSTY DORMAN
General Manager

As I consider all that Eastex has achieved over the last year, I am once again overwhelmed with gratitude for our staff and colleagues who have worked tirelessly to make our co-op successful. Over this past year, our team continued our mission to bring fiber internet connections to every corner of our remote East Texas service area. While we are not done yet, we have made significant progress, and in 2024 we saw our first exchange area where EVERY SINGLE CUSTOMER converted to fiber. That is an exciting achievement, because it means people are embracing the many benefits of fiber broadband service.

We haven't just been building out fiber, either. This past year, we fought intense flooding and hurricane-strength storms to keep services powered and functioning, even while employees' homes and our own offices flooded. It never ceases to amaze me how our employees rise up to meet challenges like these, and I'm incredibly proud of our team's dedication and commitment.

Eastex also deployed new tools to upgrade our network and improve our customers' experience. We rolled out a chat feature on our website to allow customers to message us, both in English and Spanish. We developed broadband labels to empower you to be smarter shoppers when you evaluate internet service options. We added our fiber information to real estate databases to help homebuyers know which homes have essential and value-adding fiber access. We strengthened network resiliency with additional 911 emergency call routes. We implemented new robocall mitigation tools to help reduce those unwanted calls. Eastex also became a Smart Rural Community provider, enhancing our ability to partner with the communities we serve and advance economic development initiatives. And those are just a few highlights! 2024 was productive, to be sure.

With a new year upon us the work continues, and our mission, as always, is critical—to ensure our customers have at least the same level of connectivity and service as urban customers have in the big cities. That's why we will continue building out fiber until every customer has access to scalable gig-plus internet service, and we will continue to implement enhancements to our organizational and customer service processes. We also resolve to continue to advocate for rural broadband, to make sure rural voices are represented and heard where decisions are being made at state and federal levels, because rural matters.

May your 2025 be filled with joy. Thank you for letting us serve you.

Livingston Branch Office:
P.O. Box 1510
1704 U.S. Highway 59 Loop N.
Livingston, TX 77351-0027
936-967-1000 • 800-732-7839

Headquarters:
P.O. Box 150
3675 U.S. Highway 79 S.
Henderson, TX 75653-0150
903-854-1000 • 800-232-7839

Waskom Branch Office:
P.O. Box 1691
705 Spur 156
Waskom, TX 75692-1691
903-687-3600 • 800-232-7839

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Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc.

A member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people in the Henderson, Livingston and Waskom areas.

Eastex is proud to offer broadband through Eastex Net, and security and automation services through ECS Solutions.

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On the Cover:

Daniel Cabrera, of Henderson, is one of the millions of people taking up the fast-growing sport of pickleball. See story Page 8.

Photo courtesy of Christy Parrott

ATTENTION, HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS!

Eastex is now accepting applications for its $5,000 scholarships for postsecondary education.

Scholarship applicants must be high school seniors graduating from a public, private, parochial or homeschool. Applicants must live in the Eastex service area as a member of the immediate family of an active Eastex member. Active members are defined as subscribers receiving local service from an Eastex exchange after Jan. 1 of the year of application. Recipients cannot be children of Eastex staff members or its board of directors.

To find out more about the specifics of the scholarship, or to request an application, call or visit one of Eastex's offices in Henderson, Livingston or Waskom. Applications can be requested by phone or in person after Jan. 1. Office addresses and phone numbers can be found at eastex.com.

GAME ON!

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	7		3		5		2	
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ANSWERS

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8	2	9	5	1	3	6	7	4
1	9	4	6	7	8	5	2	3
9	5	2	8	9	1	4	3	7
7	8	1	4	3	6	2	9	5
6	4	3	7	5	2	1	8	9

Get the Gig!

Stream, game, work and learn. Want the smoothest, fastest broadband available for all your family's needs? Eastex offers a Gig connection in certain areas. Check availability at eastex.com or call us

- Henderson, 903-854-1000
- Livingston, 936-967-1000
- Waskom, 903-687-3600

Roll Out the Red Carpet

Fans play key role in film festivals' success

Story by KATHY DENES

The new year brings film fans front-row access to the latest—possibly greatest—in movie entertainment. Surprising plot twists, emotional turbulence, enlightenment, wild outdoor adventures, horror, invasions from space and even close encounters with celebrities are all in store. The 2025 film festivals are ready for their close-up.

"Over the years, our audience has given us many nicknames—spring break, immersion therapy, summer camp," says Emily Lock, conference director for the Austin Film Festival & Writers Conference. "Fans' passion for movies, TV and all kinds of new media helps aspiring creatives forge the careers they've dreamt of, propels working directors into household names and ultimately imbues their art with meaning and cultural impact."

The conference welcomes storytellers, rising talents and industry luminaries from across Texas and the world. Old friends who consider the trip a beloved tradition rub elbows with new attendees who will experience the magic of the festival for the first time, Emily says.

With 60 film festivals on the docket for 2025, Texas is rich with options for fans of about any genre and at about every price range, according to the Houston Film Commission.

FAN FOCUS

While its primary focus is giving filmmakers a place to introduce their projects

Photo by Adam Kissick

Ryan Gosling takes selfies with fans at the SXSW 2024 "Fall Guy" premiere in Austin.

Austin's State Theatre prepares to welcome festival guests to a screening.

FESTIVAL SCENE

The **Hill Country Film Festival** in Fredericksburg runs through the last weekend in May. The festival was started in 2010 by the Hill Country Film Society, which now offers year-round film programs through the monthly Indie Film Series, Summer Film Camp and Film Affare, an annual exploration of food and film.

Midsummer brings the **San Antonio Film Festival**, from July 30 to Aug. 3. Celebrating its 31st year, the festival focuses on affordable attendance and works with top local hotels and restaurants to offer discounts.

Austin hosts more than two dozen film festivals. Besides the massive 2025 **SXSW Film and TV Festival** in March, the city has other fan-friendly festivals like the **ATX Short Film Showcase**, which is held every month. Eight local projects are screened, and their Texas-based filmmakers are on hand after each for a Q&A session. The **Best of the Year Fest** is held in August.

The end of summer brings fans and industry insiders together Sept. 12 at AFS Cinema for the **Austin Under the Stars Film Festival**, showcasing indie filmmaking. And in October, the **Austin Film Festival** marks its 32nd year of championing the art of storytelling and great screenwriting.

In Houston, events start with the Jan. 20-25 **ShortFlix Film Fest**, in its second year of showcasing films of 12 minutes or less at the Pearl Theater. The **Houston Greek Film Fest** ends the season at the Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston. The MATCH, or Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston, also hosts a spring festival, April 12-13, that highlights underwater videography.

and network with industry colleagues, almost every festival relies heavily on fan participation. Screenings and special events are open to the public.

Photos courtesy of Austin Film Festival

Actor Paul Reiser answers audience questions about his film "The Problem with People" at the Austin Film Festival.

Ticket prices run the gamut from free admission upward to hundreds of dollars.

Fans at film festivals often interact with industry insiders while getting to see impactful projects that may never be shown at their neighborhood theaters. But beyond that, fans meet people with similar interests, making the festivals social events about much more than just cramming in as many screenings as possible.

Finding a great festival to attend is easy, they are plentiful. One great resource for starting your search is filmfreeway.com.

HIT THE MARK

Festival ticket sales often start well in advance, and popular festivals can sell out quickly. Some have a tiered ticketing system that prioritizes previous buyers. Tickets usually are available for purchase during the festival, but there's a chance that popular screenings and events will involve a waitlist.

To ensure access, and save money, a great choice for the adventurous film buff is to sign up as a festival volunteer. Many festivals are staffed completely by volunteers, and even the largest fests rely heavily on volunteers. Duties range from greeting patrons and taking tickets to helping out at evening parties. Volunteers often reap the rewards such as free admission and sometimes even access to industry professionals.

Another option is to become a member of the organization putting on a festival, which can bring year-round benefits. Some festivals also offer members the option of in-home streaming of films throughout the year, while others have affiliations that provide discounts at movie theaters throughout the country.

A group of pickleball players takes a break. Front row, from left, Daniel Cabrera, Taryn Cabrera, Taylor Padgett and Aubrey Padgett. Back row, from left, Kennedy Dickerson, Arne Waage, Jay Williams and Chris Padgett.

Photos courtesy of Christy Parrott

The Pickleball Connection

Fast-growing sport finds its way to East Texas

Daniel discovered pickleball last spring.

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Daniel Cabrera first picked up a pickleball paddle in the spring of 2024. After a few weeks playing with clubs in Longview and Tyler, he was hooked. It wasn't long before he decided to start a club in Henderson.

"Tyler and Longview have a thriving pickleball scene," Daniel says. "They've gotten far enough along that they can have membership fees and host tournaments. I wanted to get that going in Henderson."

The 32-year-old is one of millions of people who have embraced the funny-sounding sport with the fast-growing fanbase. According to a 2023 report from the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, the number of people playing pickleball grew nearly 224% over the three-year period before the report was released.

Texas is a big part of that growth. The state ranks third in the nation when it comes to physical locations to play pickleball, according to information from the online pickleball group, pickleheads.com. The organization notes that Houston offers at least 51 courts, making it the U.S. city with the second-largest number of locations to play after New York.

ABOVE: Pickleball, considered the fastest-growing sport in the country, appeals to players of all ages, including Aubrey Padgett.

TOP: Jay Williams hits the court.

Pickleball Primer

Thinking of taking up a new sport this year? Check out pickleball.

What is it?
Pickleball is a paddle sport that incorporates elements of tennis, pingpong and badminton. Ideally, it's played on a netted, 20-by-44-foot court, which is the same size as a badminton court and about a quarter the size of a tennis court. Pickleballs are made of thick, hard plastic and have holes.

Who can play?
Pickleball is considered a relatively low-impact sport that's easy to start at any age at any skill level.

What are the perks of pickleball?
It's considered a highly social sport with players who are welcoming. In addition, those joining organized clubs can usually set up play dates that fit in with varied schedules.

Pickleball rules are easy to learn. They correspond closely to the rules of table tennis. Pickleball paddles are even a similar shape as pingpong paddles—but larger.

Ready to Play?

Finding fellow picklers will generally involve online searches for clubs in your area and calls to local parks and recreation offices. Pickleheads.com, an online community, offers extensive resources for learning about the game and connecting with other players. Barring that, a few leads are listed below for anyone interested in getting into the game.

Henderson
In Henderson, start with the Henderson Pickleball Club. Players can also reach out to Daniel Cabrera, who founded the organization. His email is djcabrera92@gmail.com.

Livingston
The city of Livingston recently constructed four new pickleball courts at Matthew Street Park. Popular play times are at 6:30 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and 8 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Waskom
The city of Waskom's tennis courts are known to host pickleball players. But the courts aren't marked for it. For more information, give the community center a call at 903-687-3374.

By the Numbers

- 48.3 million adult Americans played pickleball at least once in 2022.
- Pickleball participation grew an average of 223.5% over a recent three-year period.
- Texas ranks third in the U.S. when it comes to the number of places to play pickleball, behind California and Florida.
- Houston offers at least 51 pickleball courts, making it second only to New York City, which offers 58.

WHY PICKLEBALL?

Pickleball was invented in 1965 by businessmen Bill Bell and Barney McCallum and a congressman, Joel Pritchard, on Bainbridge Island near Seattle. In the 2000s the sport got a boost with the founding of USA Pickleball Association, according to the USAPA's website.

As the century progressed, the number of players and locations to play grew. There are at least three main reasons it spread in popularity, according to a Sept. 3, 2022, New York Times article. For one thing, pretty much anyone can play. It's easy to learn, and it's not as physically demanding as tennis. It's considered a good workout without being overly exhausting.

Plus, it's really easy to get hooked, Daniel says. "I played tennis for 10 or 15 years, but I had some friends who said I should start playing pickleball," he says. "I loved it the moment I started playing."

He also likes that, despite the growing number of millennials and Gen Zers picking up the sport, pickleball is popular with all age groups. "I've played with people in their 60s and 70s, and I've definitely been run off the court by some of them," Daniel says. "But that's what's good about pickleball—people of all ages can enjoy it and be good at it."

COURAGE, COMMITMENT AND COMMUNITY

Volunteer fire departments welcome new members

Illustration by Adobe Stock

Story by MELANIE JONES

In times of crisis in rural communities, the first people to arrive on the scene are often friends and neighbors who sacrifice their time because they want to help, not draw a paycheck. They put out the fires. They drive the rescue vehicles. They save lives.

According to the National Volunteer Fire Council, nearly 19,000 of the nation's 29,452 fire departments are all-volunteer, and the number of those volunteers has been shrinking. In 2020, the number of volunteer firefighters reached a record low. On top of that, more than half of those volunteer firefighters in smaller departments are aged 40 or older, and 34% are over 50.

But the tide may be turning. The number of volunteer applications through NVFC increased from 31,309 in 2022 to 38,696 in 2023, the latest year for which data is available.

Kim Hilsenbeck is marketing director for the State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas, a trade association representing fire and emergency services workers for the past 148 years. She says the number of applications for volunteer firefighters through the website volunteerfirefighter.org dropped in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is rebounding. In 2020, that number was 1,992. It dropped as low as 566 in 2022, but by 2024 it was back up to 1,711.

EYES ON THE FUTURE

Kim wants to challenge the idea that every volunteer fire department is struggling for new volunteers. In many places that is the case, she says, but departments in other areas are thriving, even growing. "It's not a blanket statement," she says of the idea of a shrinking volunteer force. "It's a little more nuanced than that."

Kim says Texas volunteer fire departments overall need to think about the future and replenishing their ranks. "Some are doing a phenomenal job pulling in volunteers," she says. "Others could use a little help."

In a way, it all comes down to marketing. "Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods, from social media to word of mouth to banners on the firehouse lawn," she says. "Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people."

Social media is absolutely one tool departments must use to recruit younger members, she says, including posting videos to TikTok and Instagram. Kim recently developed a social media seminar to help smaller, more rural departments better use social media platforms as a marketing tool.

Other options to attract new, younger volunteers are for departments to partner with local school districts to offer firefighter academies and to allow students to gain volunteer hours needed for graduation by working at a fire department.

A HEALTHY MIX

Older firefighters aren't necessarily a bad thing, says Steve Hirsch, NVFC chairman. At 62, Steve is the training officer of the fire department in Sheridan County, Kansas. He recalls a man once asking him the age of the oldest firefighter in his department. He told the man 93. The man laughed and said, "No, I mean the age of your oldest firefighter that's still responding to calls." The man was shocked when Steve again replied, 93.

"But you know, that was out of a station that might get one or two calls a year," Steve says. "He'd grown up in that area his

> "Departments need to have a toolbox of marketing and outreach methods ... Fundamentally, it involves understanding and communicating with people."
>
> —Kim Hilsenbeck, State Firefighters' and Fire Marshals' Association of Texas marketing director

Photo courtesy of Steve Hirsch

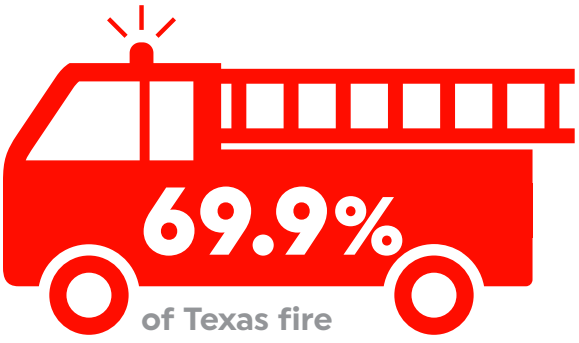
National Volunteer Fire Council Chairman Steve Hirsch has been training firefighters for 25 years.

Photo by Adobe Stock/Teerapong23

entire life. He knew where every hole and every gate was in his neighborhood. He wasn't out there pulling hose or doing entry, but he was able to drive a pickup. It worked out nice."

Steve, who has led fire training in Kansas for 25 years through the state association, sees the benefits of having a wide age range of firefighters. "The departments I go into that are really good departments have a nice mix of older and younger people," he says. "The older people keep the younger ones from making the mistakes that we've all made, and the younger ones have the stamina to get stuff done."

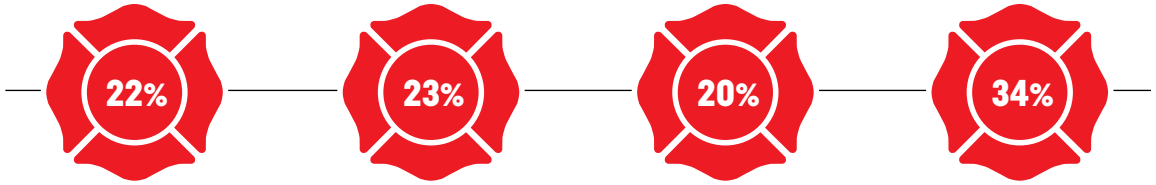
It's important to keep recruiting, he says, because fire departments are vital to a community's safety, and firehouses are often a hub for gatherings and activities. "What is a community going to do when they don't have a fire department?" Steve says. "That's probably the newest, biggest building in that town of 80-some people. People use that fire station for all sorts of events in the community. A lot of our small towns have lost their school, they've lost their grocery store. A lot of them have lost their banks. Some of them don't have cafes anymore. So that fire department becomes the glue that binds that community together. And, you know, you lose one more glob of glue, and pretty soon, things just fall apart."



11.8%
of Texas fire departments are mostly volunteer

200%
Increase in call volume in the last 35 years

The volunteer fire service is an aging population. In communities under 2,500:



Source: National Volunteer Fire Council

In the MON

Cash-back apps and other ways to save

Story by JEN CALHOUN

Every new year, saving money tops many people's lists of resolutions. But what if there's a way to bring more money in without taking on a second—or third—job? It's possible, and all that's needed is a smart phone and a little extra time, patience and care.

NEW WAYS TO CASH IN

When designing a plan to save money, it's smart to consider cash-back apps. Cash-back apps can be installed on a smart phone or other digital device. The apps might offer ways to get rebates on products, coupons or points that can be redeemed for discounts. Some of the most popular cash-back apps might sound familiar, including Rakuten, Ibotta, Pogo and Fetch. Each one has its pros, and the quality and quantity of the benefits could depend on a consumer's spending habits.

The upside is that cash-back apps can be legitimate ways to save money over time. The primary downside is that they aren't a one-and-done solution. Cash-back apps require some work and planning on the part of the consumer.

It's also important to understand that, while saving thousands of dollars a year is possible, it's not going to happen all at once. It might take time to see big savings, but one thing's for sure—every dime saved adds up.

Adobe Stock/trekandphoto

APPS THAT PAY

One of the most well-known cash-back apps is Rakuten. Here's how it works: A customer downloads the Rakuten app or the Rakuten browser extension to their device. Every time the user shops at Rakuten's 3,500 partner stores via its portal, the user is rewarded with a cash bonus. The payment is a portion of the referral fee Rakuten receives for having directed customers to the online shop, and it's paid to the consumer every three months by check or by PayPal without fees or forms.

This kind of app is a big win if the customer already planned to buy that dress, handbag or vacuum cleaner from a Rakuten-affiliated shop. However, it's not a money-saving technique to buy something unnecessarily just to get a few extra dollars.

Another popular consumer app, Ibotta, offers cash back for purchases made in person and online. To access deals, search the Ibotta app for offers that work. For example, a couple looking for dinner out might find an Ibotta deal at a nearby restaurant. It also works for regular shopping and travel. To get the rewards, simply upload a photo of the receipt and the money is dropped into a bank account, PayPal or gift card.

Newer apps on the market are finding their fans, too. The Fetch rewards app lets users earn rewards points by taking photos of receipts, which are in turn redeemable for gift cards or cash cards. Fetch also makes it fun by letting users compete with friends on a monthly leaderboard.

For those who want to focus on their everyday spending, Shopmium might be a good choice, too. This app lets users get cash back on name-brand items from the supermarket. Think of it as a rebate-generator for top-brand yogurts, detergents and other products. Simply buy the product, submit a photo of the receipt and product barcodes and start a cash-back balance.

RetailMeNot is a company mostly known for finding coupons. However, the long-standing website-turned-app also lets users search for deals and activate offers for cash back, which can be paid out through PayPal or Venmo. Its best feature, according to NerdWallet, is that users can stack coupon codes and cash-back offers to gather even more savings on purchases.

Other cash-back and coupon resources include Pogo, Swagbucks, Shopkick, Receipt Hog, ReceiptPal, ReceiptJar, CoinOut, Checkout 51, Merryfield, Frisbee Rewards, MyPoints, Tada and InboxDollars, to name several.

OTHER WAYS TO SAVE

Cash-back apps aren't the only way to reduce costs and keep a little cash on hand. Anyone serious about saving money in the new year should check to see if their favorite stores offer apps and coupons. Many do these days, including Dollar General, Family Dollar, Publix, CVS, Walgreens, Target and Food City.

It's also a good idea to check credit cards with rewards points. Many of them offer monthly specials unique to card members that can help users collect double points for things like gas purchases, groceries and travel. Using those can make a big difference and might even pay for a Christmas gift or even airfare by the end of the year.

Technology can help in other ways when it comes to saving money. Using a budgeting app to track incoming and outgoing payments can help track money and discover problem areas. Be willing to buy used items, too. Sites like Facebook Marketplace can offer great local deals on furniture, appliances and more.

The high-tech world has made it easier than ever to sniff out savings, but it still takes some work and commitment. Still, pennies saved today can make a big difference over a year, two years or a decade.

Adobe Stock/reznik_val

All the Comforts of Home

Classic trio's widespread appeal endures

The definition of comfort food depends on your region. In the Midwest, it might be a bubbly hot dish just pulled from the oven. In the Southwest, comfort may come in the form of a steaming bowl of chili, while Southerners might look toward biscuits and gravy with a side of grits.

Three simple dishes, however, bring together the entire culinary country—tomato soup, a gooey grilled cheese sandwich and a warm slice of apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Food Editor Anne P. Braly is a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Photography by ***Mark Gilliland***
Food Styling by ***Rhonda Gilliland***

CREAMY TOMATO SOUP

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 3 cups yellow onions, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 (28-ounce) cans tomatoes
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil or 1 1/2 tablespoons dried basil, plus more to serve
- 1 tablespoon sugar, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
- Dash of Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Heat a nonreactive pot or enameled Dutch oven over medium heat. Add butter, then add chopped onions. Saute 10-12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened and golden. Add minced garlic, and saute 1 minute until fragrant.

Add crushed tomatoes with their juice, chicken stock, chopped basil, sugar, pepper and a dash of Worcestershire. Stir and bring to a boil then reduce heat, partially cover with lid and simmer 10 minutes.

Use an immersion blender to blend the soup in the pot or transfer to a blender in batches and blend until smooth—being careful not to overfill the blender with hot liquid—then return soup to the pot over medium heat.

Add heavy cream and grated parmesan cheese and return to a simmer. Season to taste with salt and pepper, if needed, and turn off the heat.

Ladle into warm bowls, and top with more parmesan and a sprinkle of basil.

Makes 4 sandwiches

- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 yellow onions, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme or 1/4 teaspoon dried
- 2 teaspoons fresh rosemary or 3/4 teaspoon dried, divided
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 8 slices artisan sourdough bread
- Mayonnaise
- 12 ounces Gruyere cheese, grated at room temperature
- 6 ounces sharp white cheddar cheese, grated at room temperature
- 4 thin slices Muenster cheese, at room temperature

Add 1 1/2 tablespoons butter and olive oil to a skillet and heat over medium-low heat. Add diced onions, salt, pepper, fresh thyme and 1 teaspoon of fresh rosemary to the hot skillet and saute about 10 minutes, stirring often, until onions are soft and starting to brown. Stir brown sugar into the onions and cook another minute. Transfer onions to a plate.

For each sandwich: Spread one side of two pieces of bread with a little bit of mayonnaise.

To the same skillet, add remaining butter and rosemary and heat over medium heat. Add both pieces of mayonnaise-coated bread, mayonnaise side down, and cook until bread is golden brown and crunchy, 2-3 minutes.

As soon as you add the bread to the skillet, add a bit of cheese to the top of each piece. Once it starts to melt a little, sprinkle a couple tablespoons of the caramelized onions over the top of one of the pieces of bread.

When the bread is golden brown, sandwich the pieces of bread together and cook on low heat until the cheese is fully melted. Transfer to a plate and repeat with remaining slices of bread and ingredients.

GRANDMA'S SIMPLE APPLE PIE

- 1 double-crust pie pastry
- 1 large egg, beaten

Filling:

- 6-7 cups apples, about 2 pounds
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg

Preheat the oven to 425 F. Peel the apples and cut them into quarters. Remove the core and slice the apples 1/4-inch thick.

In a large bowl, combine the apple slices with lemon juice, sugar, flour, cinnamon and nutmeg. Toss apple mixture well and set aside.

Roll out half of the pastry dough into a 12-inch circle. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the dough and fill it with the apple mixture.

Roll out the remaining dough and cover the apple filling. Pinch the edges to seal, trimming any excess. Style the edges as desired by crimping or pressing with a fork.

Cut four to five slits on top of the crust to allow the steam to release. Whisk the egg with 2 teaspoons of water or milk and brush over the crust.

Bake at 425 F for 15 minutes, then reduce the temperature to 375 F and continue baking for another 35-40 minutes or until the crust is golden and the apples are tender.

Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 30 minutes before serving. Serve with vanilla ice cream, if desired.

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