

Bracing for potluck:

The unwelcome prospect of sharing a meal at a class party (1995):

On this afternoon's drive home, I fretted about the upcoming end of month class party:

As much as I'd prefer a regular working day—after 2 months together with the same class I can't ignore the want of 'closure'—however morbid the word. When I asked the students for suggestions, the response was predictable:

Chin Fun perkily suggested going out for *dim sum*—which was met by the polite smile of Trang, who probably can't afford it. With the weather too dreary for a field trip, that left the standard option: a pot-luck lunch. While the majority seemed more resigned than enthusiastic—at least Consuela and Pilar—already planning to make *tortas* together—grinned and nodded.

So, another potluck it will be: the long morning of regular teaching while pretending to ignore the odours (*kimchi biryani?*) wafting from the back of the class. Finally, at noon, the dusty tables will be squeaked together to receive the bowls and dishes for the multi-cultural repast. Then will follow the expectation to sample every wiggling or jellied thing thrust forward ('*Try this, teacher! More!*') along with the obligation to praise every morsel—especially those from dishes left otherwise untouched...

Would any one among my colleagues dare confess to being less than delighted about sharing student home cooking? As for my dark-secret: my squeamishness with potluck has nothing to do with timidity in trying exotic fare. Indeed, over decades of travel, I have been dutifully adventurous in sampling a broad range of international delicacies (fried flying ants, anyone?). Yet under duress, I would have to admit to rather more deeply rooted aversions:

During the long stretch between traffic lights down the Lougheed Highway, I tried to recall a single occasion in which I shared a common meal with my teenage cohort. I could not!

It occurred that 3 ½ decades ago in the New Brunswick backwater of my origin—eating was basically regarded as a biological function. For those of Anglo-protestant stock, that function was usually performed in silence in the privacy of the home. Of course, there were festive meals on the annual calendar—Thanksgiving, Easter, Christmas—yet celebrations involving food were rarely separated from private family life.

Food, to my recollection, was never part of house parties (which only occurred on the rare occasions when a house was empty of adults on a Friday night). Even if a bag of potato chips appeared among the liquor bottles on a kitchen table, it would be approached with caution—and not only for the risks of inducing projectile vomiting. Even in the queasy fog of alcohol, there was a native self-consciousness about eating in public. Who would grab or gobble unless he was greedy or lacking food at home? While there was democratic leveling in debauchery—no one among my mid-teen cohort doubted that in eating habits—every villager was *not* equal.

What villagers ate in the privacy of home was not simply determined by disparities of family income. No villagers went hungry—but families supported by steady work (mostly railroad union jobs) certainly ate more grocery-bought food than those with only sporadic income. Whatever the family income—most villagers kept gardens, fished and hunted. Yet a telling disparity was the extent to which families relied on the bounty of rod and gun—and exactly which wild bits they ate.

It was well-known—but never openly acknowledged—that certain families ate game or fish that others considered coarse or even disgusting. Such indulgences and restrictions did not quite conform to rules of totemic clan taboo but were sometimes hinted at in nicknames. I wonder still about the origin of those of certain lads of my cohort such as ‘Guts’ T. and ‘Dogmeat’ J.—in both cases nicknames passed down from their fathers.

My own tastes in mid-teens was largely for sweets and grease—which, fortunately, were not satisfied at home. Equally fortunate was that the nearest fast food outlets in that era were at least an hour’s drive away. (I first tasted a Macdonald’s milkshake in Bangor, Maine, at the age of 16 and thought it ambrosia). In any case, in the struggle to occasionally acquire an LP record or a new pair of Levi’s—not to mention cigarettes, beer and Saturday night dance admission—fast food would have been the last extravagance upon which one would spend a meagre allowance. Occasionally, at the price of holding a booth at the local greasy spoon just to keep out of the cold for an hour, a few buddies would share an obligatory plate of French fries and gravy. Snatching more than one’s share had more than once resulted in a stab in the back of a hand with a fork...

So it was that among that cohort—the prospect of sharing a communal meal of offerings brought from home would have seemed no more enjoyable than using a public toilet without stall partitions...

2

In the approach to the turn off to the Costco warehouse on Lougheed, I briefly considered making a quick stop to pick up drinks or maybe a dessert for the potluck. (Almost immediately I decided it would be better to wait until seeing the class sign-up list).

I then wondered how many colleagues, touting their ethnic heritages, bring along home cooking to share with students. Were I ever to bring along a ‘typical’ Anglo-Canadian dish of my early years—what might be the options?

Were the dish to be truly authentic, I would probably bring a casserole. The most common variety of this weekday mainstay consisted of canned tomatoes mixed with breadcrumbs, dumped over squeaky macaroni and baked until lightly charred. Alternating with the tomato casserole was meatloaf: dollops of greasy hamburger layered with breadcrumbs and watery ketchup. Spiked with sage and onion—it was an exotic departure from the normal flavour range of salt, black pepper and Worcestershire sauce...

Yet if I wanted to introduce a speciality from childhood—I would have to bring along the signature dish of Saturday nights: baked beans and molasses. However dear to the memories of

many of my former province, the smell of baking beans in my juvenile nostrils evoked the dread of Hockey Night in Canada and church on Sunday (In such imagining, ancient pangs of nausea are still stirred).

Nevertheless, I must admit that I was a finicky lad—skinny and wane among the husky and red-cheeked. At the same time, it would be cruel for me to disparage the cooking of a poor old mother. Our cupboard was always full and there was not a single day in which she failed to prepare both ‘dinner’ (the noon meal) and supper. Along with the casseroles—boiled potatoes, canned peas and dried up pork chops were typical fare. Garden vegetables, wild ‘fiddlehead’ greens, fresh-water fish and venison were seasonal treats—no nickname-generating bits of which were ever served.

What was served in the privacy of my boyhood home was probably typical fare of most Anglo-Canadians of the era. Indeed, many years later, on a visit to the home of a boyhood friend, I spied on a kitchen shelf a copy of a cookbook of the provincial Anglican Ladies Auxiliary—of which my mother had once been a member. In flipping though, I noted recipes of several queasily recalled dishes...

Nearing that the final underpass before Coquitlam Centre, it occurred that if I really were to introduce any of these recipes to immigrants—for the sake of authenticity I would have to insist that it be eaten in glum silence...

-1995, Mar. 27

