



The WordchipperSM

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Hotdish heaven

If the Weather Channel's contest to determine the city with the "toughest weather" was a basketball game, Fargo scored a number of three-pointers during March. From not being able to shake one of the coldest winters I can remember to going through what seems like a record number of blizzards that were bad enough to close the Interstate highways, to facing our third serious flood in as many years, if Fargo can't win this contest, I sure as heck wouldn't want to reside in the place that beats our River City on the Red.

But for many of the Garrison Keillor-type Lutherans living in Fargo-Moorhead and across the upper Midwest, last week was hunker-down hotdish time—at least it was at our house. On Monday, the Mrs. made her excellent hamburger, rice and mushroom soup concoction, and then Tuesday night was tuna-noodle time. I always add a few hard chow mein noodles to nearly all hotdishes, and then I sprinkle on a dash or two of soy sauce. Not sure how many North Dakotans and Minnesotans complement these dishes that way, but I do. I also add those little extras to "Spanish rice," another favorite at church basement "feeds." I do wish civic groups, shotgun clubs and other organizations holding benefit suppers would stop calling these things "feeds." It sounds like they're looking for a bunch of horses to mosey in and tie on the feedbag.

At any rate, I really enjoy Momma's get-ready-for-the-blizzard dishes. And it's always nice to have a leftover supply in the fridge. I wonder why hotdishes always taste better a day or two later, when warmed up. In fact, I suggested to the Mrs. she should let a hotdish "stew" for a couple of days, and then serve it. I think letting it stay in the ice box for a time allows the flavors do a little aging. But, as she quickly retorted, "That's how much you know about cooking." Actually, all I *really* know about cooking is how to use the start button on a microwave, but I'm still not absolutely clear on how to work a can opener. I'm not kidding. I remember when the Mrs. went to visit the kids in Florida and I was "batching it" for a week or so. Even I got tired of fast food and delivery-boy pizzas, so I decided to open a can of soup. Be darned if I didn't have to call the Sunshine State and ask the girls: how do you work this can opener? They didn't think that was a stupid *question*. They thought the guy who was asking it was a helpless idiot.

And, of course, last week I had to do some snow blowing again and—hopefully—that was the last time I'll have to get *her* going this year. I've assigned a female pronoun to my Toro, as my brother-in-law does to his farm equipment: "Well, *she* needs an oil change," he says. Or "*She* doesn't want to start." Kinda like ocean-going vessels are referred to as *she*, as in "*She* struck an iceberg."

But then I guess I shouldn't be surprised that a blizzard happened on March 23rd, even though the calendar said it was spring. I was born in a North Dakota blizzard on that date, some years ago. In fact, a young Soo Line railroad section hand by the name of Lynn Aas, at Benedict, N. Dak., had to get his crew together to shovel a path to enable the car carrying my mother to get to Minot's Trinity Hospital so I could be born. Lynn, who went on to be manager of the Medical Arts Clinic in the Magic City and served in the North Dakota Legislature, recalled that day when we had lunch last year. I shall forever be grateful to him and his railroad buddies. Without their help, I would have been born in a snow drift; which, of course, only those severe weather worshippers on the Weather Channel would appreciate.

As many years as I've experienced upper Midwest winters, there is no getting "used to" this kind of environment. Our climate is surprising, exciting and not for the faint of heart. Maybe that's why folks from here who move to tropical latitudes get somewhat bored with the weather. Like the Mrs. always tells me: "I love our *theater* of seasons." Great, but I wish they'd change the (expletive deleted) movie. My son-in-law with very Northern Minnesota roots proclaims, "Man is made to adapt!" Endeavoring to do that while retaining one's sanity through yet another tough winter and tardy spring, we shovel, sandbag, and expand our waistlines with homemade comfort food. Amid the cold and chaos, we find a bit of respite, a special taste of heaven, in our hunker-down hotdishes. Please pass the soy sauce, dear.