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“Hometown Cooking”: Layering Values, Mass-Produced, and Garden-Raised Foods in Tater Tot Hot Dish in Southwest Minnesota

Hot dishes, or casseroles, are popularly conceptualized as meals comprised merely of mass-produced ingredients. Through a close reading of Tater Tot Hot Dish, this article challenges this perception by examining how a single meal preparer, the author’s mother, incorporates locally grown ingredients, reflecting her idea of “hometown cooking.” This essay suggests how this ubiquitous meal in Southwest Minnesota represents not only individual and family values, but also those of community as individuals make critical food-related choices.

Keywords: foodways, family folklore, Upper Midwest, community

Introduction

As the sun descends towards the snowcapped prairie horizon, Kris Schmidt’s kitchen fills with the warmth of a hot oven and stove. The space is permeated by the rich scents of freshly browned onion and hamburger combined with the saltiness of slowly cooking tater tots and bubbling cheddar cheese. It smells like grilled hamburgers and breakfast all at once, or, in Kris’s words, “kind of like you’re home.” Kris’s description of flavor, much like the Tater Tot Hot Dish she is preparing, is multilayered. On one level it is a sentimental statement about me, her son, returning to my hometown of Westbrook, a rural community of 755 individuals in Southwest Minnesota. This area is comprised of small agricultural communities surrounded by alternating fields of corn and soybeans and farmsteads dedicated to raising cattle and pigs. The landscape is peppered by wind turbines dwarfing groves of trees. Kris is also speaking to what she refers to as “hometown cooking,” which entails “using healthy ingredients from scratch. Using practical ingredients,” with an emphasis on family cohesion and monitoring what ingredients her children and husband are consuming.

Kris’s idealized conceptualization of “hometown cooking” is embodied in the meal she is preparing, Tater Tot Hot Dish. Cookbook author Ann Burckhardt defines hot dish as a “casserole-like food common in the Midwest; normally consist[ing] of a

starch, a meat, and a vegetable mixed together with a sauce, often canned soup” (2006, 9; see also Cassidy and Hall 1991, 1125–1126). Widely referred to as casseroles throughout the United States, this all-in-one concoction is regionally known as “bakes” in Northwest Ohio and “carry-ins,” “covered-dish dinner,” and “hot dish” in Minnesota and pockets of Michigan, North Dakota, and Wisconsin (Long 2007, 35; Burkhardt 2006, 9; Cassidy and Hall 1991, 1125; Shortridge 2003, 90). Once considered a “cultured” manner of food preparation and presentation,¹ casseroles became more prevalent through their capacity to stretch resources with minimum production effort as Americans experienced food shortages and rationing during the Great Depression and World Wars (Eighmey 2010; Marling 2006, 5; Villas 2003, xi). A sense of convenience associated with casseroles was perpetuated through heavy promotion and advertising by brand name producers, like the Campbell Soup Company, and increased access to industrialized canned and frozen goods during the 1950s and ‘60s (Burckhardt 2006, 1–2; Eighmey 2010; Long 2007; Villas 2003, x–xi). Both Kris (b. 1956) and her husband, my father, Jim Schmidt (b. 1956), recall hot dishes as prevalent meals during their youth, sometimes four times a week in Kris’s family. Lucy Long observes that today, casseroles are a pervasive symbol of the Midwest, and that “[t]hey connote communal eating, sharing, and generosity” (2007, 29–30).

In her research on Green Bean Casserole in northwestern Ohio, Long (2007) observes how this particular meal speaks to Midwestern sensibilities in everyday and celebratory meal behaviors. Made from green beans, fried onions, and cream of mushroom soup, Green Bean Casserole functions as part of a “foodways aesthetic,” which she defines as a “system of evaluating the quality, pleasingness (or tastiness) of a food and the activities surrounding the preparation and consumption of that food” (2007, 30). This aesthetic is connected to a “foodways ethos,” which “refers to the moral and social values attached to food and eating” (2007, 30). This essay builds upon Long’s research by focusing on an individual meal preparer, Kris. Folklorists recognize that in order to perpetuate traditions, individuals must act to draw on them as both process and resource (Cashman, Mould, and Shukla 2011). As such, focused attention on Kris as a representative of a rural, Upper Midwestern, middle-class family of Euro-American background allows me to construct her worldview and foodways ethos as one shaped by overlapping spheres of family and community. Through the layering of mass-produced and home-grown ingredients, this essay demonstrates how Kris’s Tater Tot Hot Dish symbolizes her negotiation of the cultural and economic values of her family and social networks as learned by and expressed through community cookbooks (Figure 1).

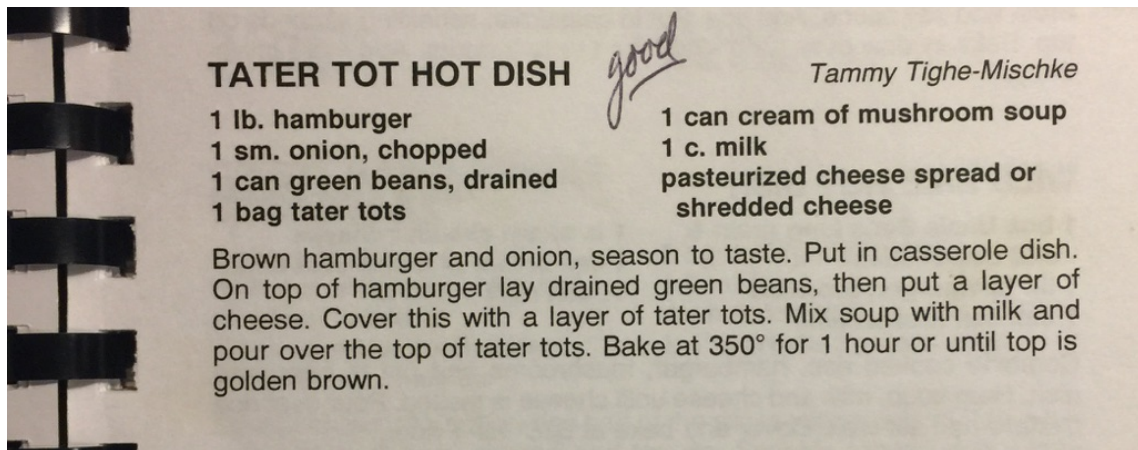


Figure 1: Recipe for Tater Tot Hot Dish used by Kris. This recipe comes from the Westbrook Women's Club's (2003) compiled cookbook, *Recipes and Remembrances* (pg. 33).

Kris has been actively involved with this research throughout its multiple stages.² Together we have discussed my notes, interpretations, and revisions, reflecting what Elaine Lawless (1991; 2000) terms reciprocal ethnography. Reciprocal ethnography becomes particularly salient when conducting fieldwork with members of one's own family, as Claire Schmidt (2017) observed when researching occupational humor among Wisconsin correctional officers. Providing her family/collaborators opportunities to provide feedback, she gained further insight into the worldview of these individuals while making necessary corrections throughout the early drafts of the text. Like Schmidt, who grew up with the stories told to her by her family, I, too, feel deeply connected to the recipe, and its associated memories, that Kris has shared with me. Through engaging in recording and interpreting folklore associated with my own family, I, like Kim Miller (1997), am aware of the question of "ownership" of the given material due to the intimacy of these relationships. Engaging in reciprocal ethnography with my mother provided invaluable insights and face-saving corrections, while allowing me to work through questions of who "owns" what with this piece of family folklore. Over time, Kris and I have embraced our roles as folklorist and collaborator/son and mother while *sharing* this part of our family's foodways.

Michael Owen Jones observes that folklorists have approached foodways scholarship by examining the symbolic connection among the performances of differential identities (2007, 129–130). He suggests three categories through which folklorists have analyzed this multilayered relationship: how/what one eats, "food choice," and "social categories" which can symbolically represent an individual's regional identity (2007, 142). One could suggest that the presentations of regional, ethnic and individual identities are, by the very nature of performance, symbolic. Much like how the pasty in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (Lockwood and Lockwood 1991),

coney in Detroit, Michigan (Lockwood 2012), and Cincinnati chili in Ohio (Lloyd 1981), have transcended ethnicity, becoming markers of regional or local consciousness, so too does hot dish appear to connect individuals across ethnic lines, aligning them to a place like Minnesota rather than their ancestral heritage. Today hot dishes can be found at fairs,³ competitions,⁴ as tourism merchandise,⁵ and specialized cookbooks⁶ serving as powerful markers of group identity as expressed in folk and popular culture (Gutierrez 1984). Minnesota humorists have also glorified the dish in murder mysteries (Cooney 2013, 2014, and 2016) and tongue-in-cheek guidebooks (Mohr 2013). Perhaps because Tater Tot Hot Dish is so unassuming, it represents an important esoteric value for Minnesotans.

Tater Tot Hot Dish also illustrates Jones's second category, food choice, wherein the "...consuming of provisions figure largely in symbolic discourse regarding identity, values, and attitudes" (2007, 129). Don Yoder argues that the foods we prepare operate as an expression of identity—an idea that is especially apparent when different groups have access to similar ingredients (1972, 329). Jones builds on Yoder's idea: the choices people make in food, from production to presentation and consumption, demonstrate the identity of "who they want to appear to be" in public (2007, 135). Hot dishes possess values through the choices a food preparer makes. In the production and consumption of meals, identities are expressed through what Charles Camp refers to as the "food event" (1989, 56). A "food event," he states, "includes both everyday and special occasions, and their proper study must consider public and private life" (1989, 56). Camp offers valuable criteria by which one may probe foodways in the food event, including specific cookware, the production process, and how these function in the performance and negotiation of identity in public and private spheres. Examining the production and consumption of Tater Tot Hot Dish, including the choices available to an individual cook, reveals explicit expressions of family and community values over time.

Roger Abrahams suggests that foods as identity markers are enacted in the homes of individuals, representing a form of choice, particularly when "outsiders" are present at the dinner table (1984, 20–21). Food as a performance allows one to examine the boundaries of an individual's community and degrees of psychological connection to different groups (Noyes 2003, 28, 33). Individuals operate within multiple, sometimes overlapping, groups, displaying differential identities. The identities that people choose to enact can guide them through their interactions within social spheres, defining a sense of community as distinct from others throughout the calendar year and life cycle (Bauman 1971; Santino 1994, 3–4). The useful notion of differential identity—and the acknowledgment that people make choices about ingredients, preparation and food preferences reflecting community values and standards—can help one see the construction and dissemination of cookbooks as an act of performing community (Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore 1986; Theophano 2002).

Community, Cookbooks, and Cooking Repertoire

Community cookbooks, according to Lynn Ireland (1981), operate as mediums of community autobiography through display of realistic or idealized consumption practices. While reviewing hot dishes in Kris's cookbooks and talking about her favorite cookbooks, I observed how commonplace hot dishes are within the community. These cookbooks, with recipes authored by family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, put into place the "rules" of ingredients and preparation, and offer personalization (either through incorporation of newspaper and magazine clippings, or handwritten commentary). They engage notions of community both in and outside of the home.

Kris was born in Windom, the seat of Cottonwood County. The fourth of nine children, Kris grew up working with and watching her mother, Kathy Johnson (née Vrchota), and her grandmother garden, can foods, cook, and clean up after meals. Kris notes that her mother is a wonderful and talented cook and made everyday meals for an ever-increasing family: "From sauerkraut to jellies to minced meat pie, she could do everything." Kris learned how to cook and, perhaps most importantly, the values of producing one's own food and of cooking from "scratch." Cottonwood County has been home to Kris's family for multiple generations. Kris's father, Lynn Johnson, was born in Windom and operated a hardware store inherited from his father, which remains in the family today. Kris moved away to pursue her degree in education in Mankato, Minnesota in 1975. In 1979, she began a thirty-five-year teaching career in Fulda, Minnesota, in Murray County, immediately west of Cottonwood. In 1983, she married Jim and they began their life together in his hometown of Westbrook.

Kris and Jim have been, and continue to be, active with local and county organizations. Kris taught for many years, albeit in a different school system than the one where my younger sister, Audra, and I were enrolled: Westbrook Walnut Grove (WWG). However, because my sister and I were active in extracurricular activities, she constantly engaged with other parents and educators at events and fundraisers at our school. Currently, she teaches part-time in the WWG school district. Faith is a driving force in Kris's life, shaping her worldview and community engagement. She was baptized, confirmed, and married in the Lutheran Church. Since moving to Westbrook, she has been actively involved in Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, serving as a Sunday School Teacher, a member of the "serving group," and on the church board. She has also been a member of community-centered groups and maintains overlapping friend groups with whom she gathers regularly for coffee, day trips, or fishing excursions.

During college, her early public high school teaching career, and the first years of marriage to Jim, Kris spent a great deal of time building her cooking repertoire by looking through cookbooks and experimenting with recipes. Some of the major gifts she received at her bridal showers were casserole dishes and cookbooks, a number of

which were written by community organizations and church groups. Kris's cookbook collection also includes texts from wider publishing houses like Betty Crocker and The Gooseberry Patch. She regularly receives the monthly *Taste of Home*. She developed early on the habit of writing "very good," "good," "not good" or "yuck" by recipes to guide her to enjoyable dishes or to help her avoid others (Figure 2).

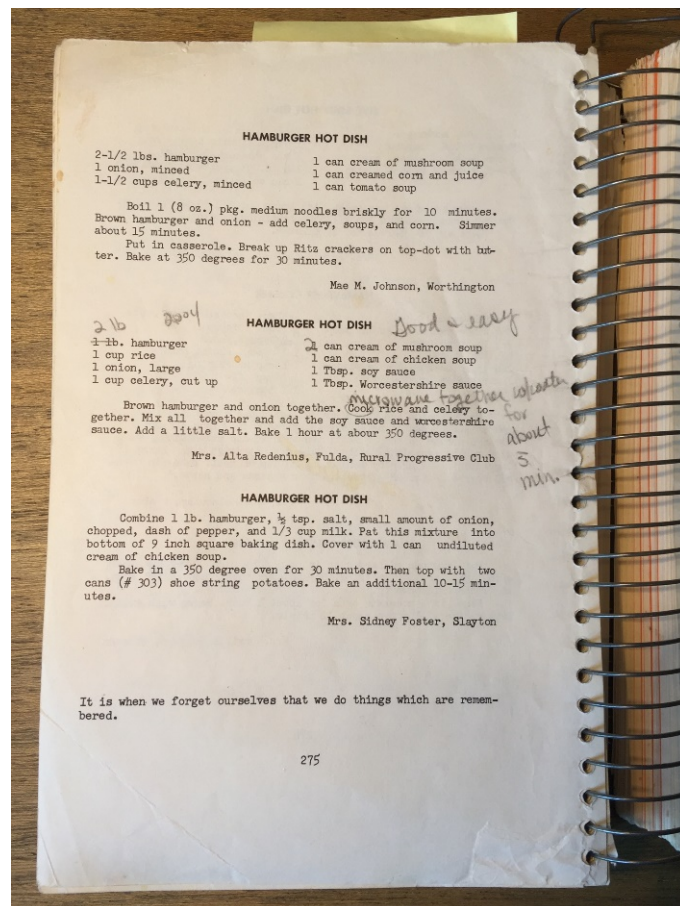


Figure 2: Kris's handwritten notes for this recipe for "Hamburger Hot Dish" from the *Crippled Children's Cook Book*.

In Minnesota, the production, sale, and distribution of community cookbooks by local organizations "serve as a public relations device," raise funds for those organizations, and are important to the spread of recipe ideas (Kaplan, Hoover and Moore 1986, 8). Due to the communal nature of their construction, community cookbooks have the potential to reveal group membership, as well as a "composite picture" of what community members consume (Noyes 2003, 16–17; Ireland 1981, 108). Diane Tye (2010) constructed a biography of her mother by examining her recipe collections, many of which were largely filled with unassuming recipes. I similarly draw on specific hot dish recipes from Kris's cooking repertoire to illuminate her social

spheres and performance of identity by drawing from two compiled texts that I use to frame her approach to producing food that pleases both her family and community.

When asked if there was a cookbook that guided her the most in her development as a cook, Kris notes one compiled by the Crippled Children's School, Inc. (1982) of Worthington, Minnesota, which she received as a wedding gift from a Westbrook couple. She uses this cookbook more than any other. "It is a basic cookbook, nothing fancy. It is just a practical approach to cooking," Kris states. Her notes are most apparent in the chapters on main meals and salads. Other cookbooks in her collection are used for desserts and dessert salads. This cookbook is significant to a wider understanding of the area because it brings together recipes, mostly submitted by women, from communities predominately throughout Southwest Minnesota. Kris actively increases the intended scope of the text by taping recipes she cuts from magazines and newspapers onto blank pages of the cookbook. Kris's actions confirm Janet Theophano's contention that, "The past merges with the present as the cookbook and its user attract recipes from other women in the community and in the larger society, women connected to one another by virtue of religion, region, ethnicity, or common cause" (2002, 51).

Hot dishes are prevalent in the "Main Dishes" and "Time Savers" chapters of this cookbook. The "Main Dishes" chapter begins with "Baked Hot Dish" and concludes with "Zucchini Casserole;" the first 30 pages of this chapter consist almost entirely of hot dish/casserole recipes (260–292). Seven recipes are simply named "Hot Dish," and each includes ground beef, with variations in vegetables, creams, and starches (278–279). Variation is dramatically apparent over all the hot dish recipes, ranging from "Egg Noodle and Tuna Hot Dish" (290) to "Sauerkraut Hot Dish" (338). The "Time Savers" chapter features four hot dishes simply titled, "Easy Hot Dish" (424–425), as well as "Quick as a Wink Hot Dish" (425). Three Tater Tot Hot Dish recipes closely resemble the one Kris practices, save for one suggesting the use of raw hamburger (426).

What might this plethora of hot dish recipes demonstrate? Applying Lynn Ireland's contention that compiled cookbooks offer ways to read the autobiography of a community, these texts assist in "determining food habits of some groups...[and] can give insight into traditional attitudes, usage and consumption" (1981, 114). They represent idealized and actualized foodways, patterns of acceptance and taboo, what food and preparation methods are in vogue, and what marks ordinary from celebratory. Kris notes the recipes she turns to the most in these cookbooks are for hot dishes and salads: not because she prefers to make these for public meals, but because she is asked to make them. At church, for example, organizing groups ask Kris and other members to bring specific items. Thus, as Leslie Prosterman (1995) observes, Kris's participation in her Midwestern social networks reinforce and shape her idealized cooking repertoire and public presentation of self as a cook. In the case of my family and Westbrook, the variety and sheer number of hot dish recipes reveals the expectations and limitations

for busy, down-to-earth, working women. Similarly, as Theophano observes, cookbooks are often “a communal affair” and operate as “records of women’s social interactions and exchanges” (2002, 10, 13). Cookbooks compiled by local organizations in Kris’s collection serve as an entry point through which one can view not only the foodways of her hometown but also a sense of her community networks and identity.

For Kris, trust is an important element in recipe selection, best exemplified by her frequent use of a cookbook compiled by residents from Westbrook. In 2003, the civic group Westbrook Women’s Club celebrated their 20th anniversary by publishing *Recipes and Remembrances*, a compiled cookbook that brings together recipes from the then twenty-two members into a seventy-eight-page, spiral-bound paperback. It features recipes ranging from pasta salad, meat loaf, and lemon custard bars, to Play-Doh. Tater Tot Hot Dish is on page 33 under the “Main Dishes” chapter. This chapter contains ninety-five total recipes, nineteen of which are hot dishes or casseroles. At the time of publication, Kris was not a member of the organization, having left in 1998 to pursue her MA in Education. She did not contribute a recipe but still purchased several copies. Kris recalls, “I knew each [member] and had been to many of their homes and knew them to be good cooks.” If she cannot find what she is looking for in the *Crippled Children School’s Cook Book*, Kris turns to *Recipes and Remembrances*, which she does a couple of times each month. She says that the best part about cookbooks like this one is that she can trust the recipes because each cookbook tends to note who submitted the recipe, and she, or Jim, know many of these individuals. “In a small town like ours,” Kris says, “people don’t want to have their name by a recipe that isn’t good” (Figure 3). This sense of community and shared values expressed through food preparation is reflected in Kris’s evaluation of what constitutes a desirable meal, or foodways aesthetic, both in terms of appearance and for the health of the family. She notes that these cookbooks contain, “a lot of good recipes—recipes that work. They are good examples of hometown type cooking or family cooking.” Kris states, regarding hometown cooking, that “Some of these cookbooks nowadays have ingredients where I wonder, ‘Where am I going to find that?’” This question of “finding” ingredients is important as many of the smallest neighboring communities, such as Dovray (pop. 67) to the west or Storden (pop. 214) to the east, do not have grocery stores. Westbrook’s grocery store is tiny in comparison to those in larger communities.

Hometown cooking also relates to Kris’s idealized notion of family, rooted in structure and reflected by sharing meals together. Hometown cooking, to Kris, is also about dining in rather than dining out. She states that,

Growing up, remember how we always sat down to eat as a family? I think this is extremely important. So along with that hopefully comes a home cooked meal. Is it hard sometimes to come home after work and make a home cooked meal? Yes. But is it worth it? Yes. It brings your family together. It gives you time to talk, you know what they are eating

because you are watching them, what they are drinking, like water and milk versus pop. As you guys [Jared and Audra] got older you wanted more water. Even now when you come home I still make sure there is water, right?

Hometown cooking may appear to be “nothing fancy,” but to Kris it means sharing convenient and enjoyable meals with family, neighbors and friends with the goal of creating and strengthening familial bonds through maternal care.

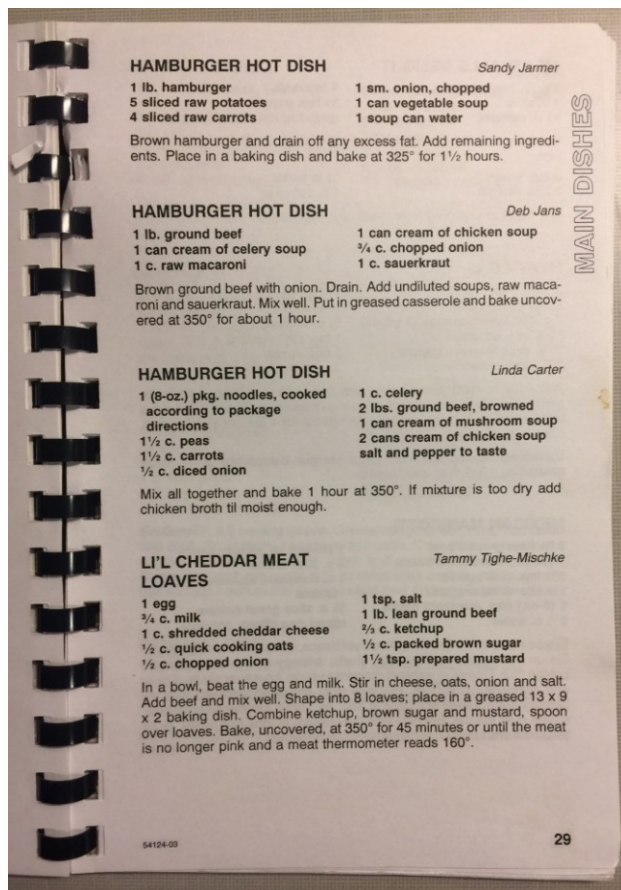


Figure 3: Three recipes for “Hamburger Hot Dish.” *Recipes and Remembrances* (2003, 29).

While the consideration of convenience and availability of certain ingredients in a rural area certainly affects Kris’s choice in food preparation, a more significant, deeper consideration is her notion of “scratch.” Kris defines “scratch” as foods that are “not already made—your basic vegetables or hamburger. It is not going to say, ‘use macaroni and cheese.’ It is from your basic foods. It is not a packaged source of food that you are going to be using, you are going to be using the baseline vegetables, dairy, or protein.” Thus, she is not limited in her palette of ingredients. Cooking from “scratch” is about the choice and manipulation of individual ingredients as the cook prepares a meal like hot dish. Using “baseline” ingredients permits Kris a sense of agency with

recipes. While mass-produced foods have become a staple of Midwestern pantries, their inclusion does not create a separation from or disconnect between the cook and a sense of ownership or creativity.

What about recipes from these cookbooks that ask for a commercially produced soup or pasta sauce? Does the incorporation of these products neutralize the “scratch” component? “Not to me,” Kris states. “What else are you supposed to use? Make them from the beginning is not how I roll, not how most cooks do. The working people...in my estimation people who use a cream of mushroom soup are going to use it. Are you going to make it from scratch?” It appears that there are multiple levels of scratch even within a homemade recipe. Regardless, even if Campbell’s Soups are brought together with homegrown onions, this does not take away from a sense of the “home” in the concept of what is “homemade”: “I still made it. I still made it from the basic ingredients.” Kris maintains a sense of autonomy and creativity over a recipe through this understanding and, with it, the potential for modification of a recipe.

Negotiating Garden-Raised and Store-Bought Ingredients

Kris’s production of Tater Tot Hot Dish represents a paradox of choices and values that, as Long notes, “seem to represent the traditional, but...also...the modern, an embracing of technology and corporate America” (2007, 39). On one level, this hot dish, as well as similar recipes, is appreciated for its emphasis on convenience, ability to stretch resources, and access to convenient ingredients due to mass-produced food. On the other hand, some Upper Midwesterners, like Kris and Jim, have continued to raise, process, and preserve their own foods as meal ingredients. The Schmidts participate in the comparatively labor-intensive practices today of vegetable gardening and periodically raising beef and poultry. They preserve these through canning and freezing and incorporate them into everyday and celebratory meals, often as key ingredients for meals like Tater Tot Hot Dish.

A casual drive through Westbrook reveals a variety of resident gardens including raised beds, potted plants, and tilled earth plots. Camp states that, “In a larger sense, the notion of garden is deeply cultural, almost independent of what is grown or the need for growing it. The word is, after all, both a noun and a verb—a place and an activity with separate levels of function and aesthetics that often provide disguises for each other” (1989, 86). Although Kris and Jim come from a middle-class, trade, and business family background, gardening was an important component of their childhood. In 1984, Kris and Jim had a small garden at their first home, during which time she was in charge of its maintenance. As time progressed and properties changed, Jim took over and brought gardening into a more central role in the couple’s lives. Today, their gardening practices demonstrate a “purposeful modification or change to the physical environment” combining aesthetic and utilitarian purposes (Rapoport 1990, 12; Anderson 1972).

Kris and Jim's example confirms Barbara Shortridge's (2003) observation that locally grown products remain important ingredients in Minnesotan's diets. In Southwest Minnesota, individual and cooperative family gardens may operate, as Camp notes, as forms not only of food production but also of economies, identity, and pleasure. Gardens can function to provide a sense of control of the "healthy" quality of food families put into their bodies as opposed to what chemicals may be found in packaged food at a store (1989, 86). Through gardening, Kris can enact a further sense of control over the ingredients her family consumes, having seen the vegetables go from seed to table. She is thus able to obtain the "baseline" ingredients necessary to cook from "scratch." Production of Kris's idea of "hometown" cooking, then, begins in their garden.

The size of the garden and the vegetable varieties the couple grow provides a clear message about the connection they both feel to the land. The Schmidts own three properties on the western edge of Westbrook—their home, an alfalfa field next door to the north, and a barnyard that consists of a large red tin-sided structure and open grounds located one house away to the south. The property was once owned by Jim's parents, Donna and Marlin Schmidt. Here, Marlin practiced carpentry and raised horses, goats, dogs, and geese. After Marlin's passing in 2005, Jim inherited the property. The family's food production largely occurs at the barn. The garden section currently comprises a 7,500 sq. ft. field that is rich and diverse with produce ranging from dill to pumpkins and sweet corn to peppers.

By harvest, the couple have a rich bounty of produce and protein which they preserve through canning and freezing. Kris and Jim have been canning produce from their garden since moving into their current home in 1993. Preservation permits Kris a sense of agency in which harvester and meal preparer become entwined. Due to their soft tissues, vegetables experience quick cellular deterioration following harvest. Canning ensures a longer shelf life, reducing spoilage with hermetically sealed lids on metal or glass containers that keep out microbes. They use transparent glass containers for canning which can withstand the extreme water temperatures and are aesthetically appealing (Jackson 1979; Larouse and Brown 1997; see also Christensen 2018). Although the couple works on canning together, there appear to be gendered tasks; Jim handles the more dangerous pressure cooker as he is tall enough to handle this operation and Kris focuses on the hot water bath method to preserve tomatoes and homemade jellies.

Depending on the harvest, the Schmidts may can anywhere from forty to fifty jars of green beans from their garden during the annual growing season (Figure 4). Their kitchen, at times, becomes a veritable canning operation as peaches, strawberries, and mulberries are transformed into jellies and jams, and onions, tomatoes, and peppers become salsa. They also pickle green beans, beets, and freshly caught fish. Meanwhile, they stock freezers with packages of cauliflower, broccoli, carrots, and rhubarb. Reinforcing Camp's contention that gardens also operate as a source of gift

economy, the couple distributes a significant number of these jars as gifts to friends and family (1989, 86).

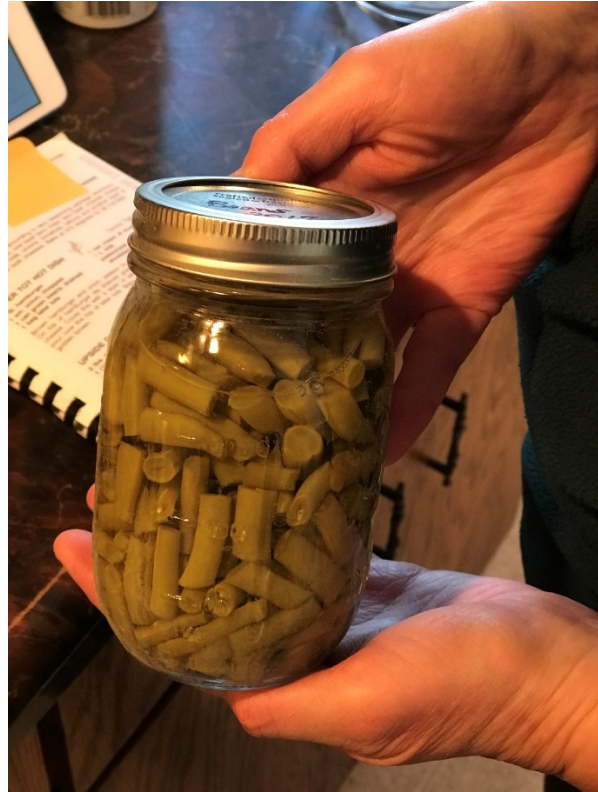


Figure 4: Kris presents a can of sealed green beans which she is going to use in the hot dish. Photo by author. 2018.

The couples' gardening and preservation practices are significant as money-saving techniques, hobbies, stress relief, and gifts, and provide baseline ingredients for dishes such as Tater Tot Hot Dish. The recipe for Tater Tot Hot Dish used by Kris incorporates not only green beans and onions but also encourages participation in local, regional and global economies. Given the extensive amount of labor and resources that come from gardening, it may not be a surprise that, in her cooking, Kris rarely uses store-bought frozen or canned vegetables. These mass-produced food preservation techniques affected casserole-type recipes in the mid-twentieth century and were championed by large industrialized food processors like Clarence Birdseye (Smith 2014). "When I'm eating those preserved items," she states, "I'm wondering what I'm eating. I don't know where they came from. I know where they came from when I eat things we canned. I know that there is only a half a teaspoon of salt and water, and that is all that is in the beans." By using ingredients they grew and preserved, she exercises control over the products her family consumes at home. Kris comments that, "We have all these beautiful beans in the basement, so why not use them? Plus, all four of us like green beans...It's senseless not to preserve these vegetables so that they can be

enjoyed through winter.” This notion of beauty alludes to not only the physical structure of the beans and the aesthetics associated with canning, but their taste. Over the years, the couple has developed palates that can differentiate between mass-produced beans and those from the garden: the local beans are firmer and have more natural flavor. Kris is also speaking to a desire not to waste food, especially what the family goes to great lengths to harvest and preserve.

Each year the couple also plants rows of onions, some of which Kris uses when cooking Tater Tot Hot Dish by browning them with the ground beef. By harvest time, the onions begin to “almost come out of the ground,” revealing more of their bodies. Once harvested, these onions are stored in a gunny sack in the basement’s fruit room where they are hung and allowed to “breathe.” The couple uses these onions throughout the year, incorporating them into various meals as side dishes and ingredients. In 2017, however, Kris notes that they ran out of onions toward the end of spring, forcing her to purchase them from the grocery store. “It was really nice,” she says, “to go down into the basement, grab an onion and there you have it.” Her use of onions begins to demonstrate the negotiation between grown and purchased products, where substitution is not only acceptable but at times essential.

The potatoes grown in the family garden further reveal the paradox between the choice of home-grown or mass-produced ingredients. In recent years, the couple has harvested a variety of potatoes, such as Yukon and russet, for their everyday meals. However, Kris does not make her own tater tots. First released to American consumers in 1956 by the Ore-Ida Potato Company, tater tots were produced from leftover scraps from French fries, cut further and blended with “natural seasonings.” Today Americans consume approximately 70 million pounds of tater tots (H. J. Heinz Company 2014; Ore-Ida 2015; Zorn 2014). Kris has no desire to learn how to make tater tots, stating that, “who wants to go to that much work when you can buy them? If I couldn’t make tots and you told me I couldn’t buy them, that hot dish would be gone [laughs]. I wouldn’t be making it.” The very existence of this hot dish in Kris’s repertoire depends *entirely* on the availability of this mass-produced food stuff. Additionally, the uniformity of tater tots across decades has affected Kris’s perception of what the dish is supposed to taste like. “You need that tater tot taste, that tater tot texture to finish it off and have a nice topping,” she notes. Flavor and texture, then, are tied to the industrial process that creates the sense of satisfaction with Tater Tot Hot Dish and baking it from scratch. Their crunchy nature is one of the essential indicators that this dish is ready for consumption and adds a playful component to the meal as an eye-catching finger food.

The labor-intensive food production of ingredients necessary to produce Kris’s Tater Tot Hot Dish also includes beef as the central ingredient. For several years, Jim raised a couple head of beef in the lot where Marlin once had horses. After butchering, he would “split” the beef among individuals who “paid into” the cost, thus contributing to local economies and supplying his home-raised beef to multiple kitchens. Farmers

in southwest Minnesota raise livestock, mostly cattle, pigs, and poultry (Hart and Ziegler 2008). This is reflected in Shortridge's Minnesota Special Meal survey wherein beef was the most common protein noted as main dishes by respondents (34%), followed by pork (21%) (2003, 76). Today, because of the labor and financial costs, the couple purchase their beef from a local farmer they know. Their participation in the local economy further demonstrates the couples' value in trust as they know how the cattle were fed, treated, butchered, and processed.

The Schmidts regularly incorporate purchased dairy products into their everyday and celebratory meals. Kris made sure milk was present as her preferred beverage for her children and as an ingredient, reinforcing the agricultural identity of the region and dairy's fiscal dominance and availability in local stores. This confirms the results of Shortridge's Minnesota special meal survey; milk was mentioned as a dominant beverage choice (70% of respondents), tied with coffee (2003, 78). In a state where milk has "near universal acceptance," dairy products are important ingredients for Minnesota cooks, and dairy wields a heavy agricultural influence on the state's economy (2003, 82–83). The national brand Land O'Lakes, which produces milk, butter, and other dairy products, is based in Minnesota (2003, 83).

Canned condensed cream of mushroom soup is another significant ingredient in Kris's Tater Tot Hot Dish that conveys her concerns for convenience and economic frugality. As she attests, "If the hot dish recipe asked me to make a soup first, I'd say, 'No.' All I have to do is go to the store and pick up a condensed soup. The nice thing is [hot dishes] are easy to make, they aren't super complicated, and they're not gourmet." Millions of homemakers across the country use Campbell's Soups as meals and as ingredients (Marling 2006, 6; Villas 2003, 249). Established in 1869, Campbell's developed condensed soup in 1897, making it widely available to American consumers in 1911 (Campbell's Soup Company 2019; Long 2007, 35; Sidorik 2009, 20). In 1934, Campbell's introduced its Chicken Noodle and Cream of Mushroom soups. Expanding the use of instant soups as an ingredient, in their test kitchen Campbell's created a Tuna Noodle Casserole version in 1934, and in 1955 they debuted Green Bean Casserole (Long 2007, 29–34).

While the couple purchase a variety of cheeses, Kris expressly uses cheddar in Tater Tot Hot Dish. "Yellow cheese looks better than white cheese would," Kris notes. "That and you and Audra liked Cheddar the best." Cheddar has an "intermediate" texture, with a mid-pH level, resulting in a protein structure that "assumes an increasingly more compact conformation and the cheese becomes shorter in texture and fractures at a smaller deformation" (Lawrence, Gilles and Craemer 1993, 22). This "intermediate position" may be part of the wide economic success of and consumer preference for Cheddar (1993, 222). This texture is accompanied by a flavor profile supported by milk fat and lactic starters which create a sense of "balance" in the cheese taste (1993, 25). Kris typically uses mass-produced Cheddar from low-cost producers like Kraft, purchasing it in brick form and shredding before use. The use of mass-

produced and widely distributed products draws on the timesaving, resource-spreading, and economical emphasis of hot dishes using easily purchased and ready-made ingredients. While the recipe calls for 1½ cups of cheese, Kris typically uses more as she does not want to go “chintzy” with her portion size, ensuring that all the green beans are covered by creating a layer of cheddar which acts as a “gooey” binder.

Kris’s Tater Tot Hot Dish simultaneously unites mass-produced and locally grown ingredients while maintaining a foundational divide in her preparation of the dish. She begins with the locally produced ingredients, first browning a pound of ground beef with a chopped onion. Kris notes that, “Browning the onion at the same time gives really good flavor and helps give the beef that ‘yum’ factor.” She then lays this thoroughly cooked mixture in the bottom of the casserole dish, spreading it evenly to cover the base. As the oven preheats, she strains the liquid from a jar of canned green beans before spreading a layer of them on top of the beef and onion, an aesthetic preference reflecting her palate and family resources—both in terms of food stocks and economics—distinguishing her hot dish from others’ practices (Figure 5). Cookbook author Anne Burckhardt notes that Tater Tot Hot Dish, “is another of those hot dishes that is adapted and adjusted by every cook who regularly makes it. Some top the meat layer with grated cheese. Others mix canned mushrooms with the vegetable layer” (2006, 58) (Figure 6). Recipes for Tater Tot Hot Dish may also vary in the vegetable layer, often including corn and carrots.



Figure 5: Spreading the drained green beans over the browned hamburger and onions into a casserole dish. Image by author. 2018.



Figure 6: Kris spreads the freshly shredded cheddar cheese atop the green beans. Image by author. 2018.

Kris does not create a “fancy” layout design with the tater tots; rather, “I empty the bag on top, take my hand and even them out. Sometimes I have a ‘double-decker.’” The number of tater tots required to cover the dish depends on several factors: casserole dish style and size, audience, and tater tot quantity available (Figure 7). Casserole dishes vary in style and material—from circular and glass to rectangular and metal, and from enamel to disposable aluminum—and can vary in size (Villas 2003, 2-3). Having multiple casserole dishes, Kris chooses which to use based on the intent of the meal. Kris wants to ensure that “the whole top is covered, I like a whole solid layer of tater tots.” Although the tater tots may appear in disarray, she believes that “if you have a whole thick layer of tater tots it looks nice.” This aesthetic choice speaks to Kris’s notion of “hometown cooking,” emphasizing ingredients and community rather than a pretentious front. The last ingredient Kris adds is a mixture of cream of mushroom soup and milk. She pours it over the tater tots, where it will seep into and “bind” the distinct layers of local and mass-produced foods together (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Placing the tater tots atop the shredded cheddar cheese. Image by author. 2018.

Figure 8: Preparing the Cream of Mushroom Soup and milk mix. Kris uses the emptied can to measure the milk to achieve a desired soup to milk ratio which also “washes out” any soup not initially poured into the measuring bowl. Image by author. 2018.



Figure 9: After pouring the Cream of Mushroom Soup and milk mixture atop the tater tots, Kris uses a wooden mixing spoon to make sure the mixture is evenly distributed. Image by author. 2018.

For Kris, the distinct organizing principle for Tater Tot Hot Dish is that it must have layers, distinguishing it as a structured cultural item, one which, according to anthropologist Mary Douglas (1974), can be treated as art. As Kris places the ingredients from her garden beside those raised by a community farmer and purchased from the local grocery store on the countertop, she begins to construct her meal on a vertical alignment of horizontal layers. In the recipe featured here, the instructions note the word “layer” twice. The idea of hot dish as a food where ingredients are simply thrown into a pot and cooked, as a northeastern Ohio cook notes to Long, does not appeal to Kris nor her family (2007, 30).



Figure 10: Tater Tot Hot Dish fresh from the oven. Image by author. 2018.

Bringing a Dish to Pass

A sense of construction and appearance are important factors in Kris’s public presentation of Tater Tot Hot Dish in her community. Outside of the family meal, Kris

often prepares Tater Tot Hot Dish for community potlucks—particularly those at her church. Much smaller in scale than festivals, potlucks are similar to food events like picnics, ice cream socials, and team meals, in what Lin T. Humphrey categorizes as “small group festive gatherings” (1979, 190). These gatherings share some of the same purposes as a festival, bringing groups together to celebrate or engage in ritual, build community, and produce a sense of enjoyment through the company of other individuals in festive environments (1979, 192). Kris strongly believes in the communal nature of potlucks at Trinity Lutheran Church which provides opportunities to share one’s cooking talents and recipes outside the sphere of competition. She notes that she is, “just glad that I was able to make something that my family would have liked there for other people to enjoy. That is my main factor [for participating].” Kris observes that all the dishes at Trinity’s potlucks are laid out all at once. Nothing is left in the kitchen. “You do not want to see that [an individual’s] dish isn’t out to be slighted—and that can happen.” This notion of care for an individual’s feelings and group cohesion is echoed by Camp who observes that it is socially unacceptable for individuals to take only from the dish they brought. “To do so is to say to one’s neighbors that you prefer your own food to all others’, and you refuse others’ hospitality. To make such social statements within an event that is *about* fellowship is heresy” (1989, 72, bold and italics in original).

Kris prefers to bring Tater Tot Hot Dish to potlucks, which she refers to as her “go-to.” “It is easy and people like it. I usually have the ingredients,” she states. She suggests that she does not place a special emphasis on cooking presentation or ingredients for her family versus cooking for potlucks. “I just make sure there are plenty of tater tots and it is not skimpy. You want a lot of tater tots on the top. I like a lot of tater tots on top. Sometimes that is almost the best part...It looks better...it looks like you put a little more [effort] into it than finishing off a bag of tater tots on this one [laughs].” Kris’s sentiment echoes Long’s statement that “at such events, the casserole acts as a bridge between two realms, connecting public and private domains, making coworkers like family, and making family relationships somewhat more formal and ceremonial than they might otherwise be” (2007, 38).

There is a capacity for casseroles/hot dishes to operate not only as a bridge between public and private kitchens but also among the private kitchens of other families, particularly during periods of grief. For Kris, bringing food to friends and family experiencing the loss of a loved one functions as an extension of fellowship and neighborliness. By bringing food to someone’s home, Kris transforms these items into a symbol of community and faith—what Camp refers to as a food gift (1989, 102). Kris notes that following the death of a loved one, the main family typically has a significant number of guests visiting or staying with them. These families are often unprepared for the sudden influx of visitors. Funerals are emotionally and economically wearing periods that disrupt regular life patterns as families face not only the physical and financial difficulties of arranging the funeral but the psychological impact of the loss.

During these periods of grief, the altered routines of life, as well as meals, push the body towards the periphery until “the body becomes an object of awareness” because of appetite and satiety (Kristensen and Holm 2006, 171). Kris states that, “Usually if you are having a lot of people coming over to your house, usually what you are needing are main dishes. If you want to be helpful, that is what you bring.” Food operates as a conduit through which both community and body can be rebuilt and strengthened. Camp observes that providing a warm, comfortable meal validates grief by allowing the bereaved to focus on the matter at hand as opposed to hosting and preparing meals. Funeral food also “eschews the types of food ordinarily given” by neighbors through emphasis on practical meals as opposed to desserts (1989, 102).

The choice of what types of funeral food Kris brings to grieving families reveals a negotiation of food gifts associated with spheres of emotional connectivity, or “how close you are to these people.” Kris notes that, “Sometimes I will bring a case of pop or paper goods, sometimes pizza. If you are really close to someone, you will bring something special, something that makes you go ‘out of your way.’” Hot dishes may appear to be easy to prepare, but, in this context and in their association with hometown cooking, they demonstrate a deeper level of care. The families Kris brings hot dishes to are neighbors, close friends, and family. “[Hot dishes] are all made, ready for them to cook when they are ready. These are easy to reheat and very filling. They provide a home cooked meal.” Given the sensitivity of this time in conjunction with the necessity to retrieve one’s cookware, Kris notes that a few social mores have developed to avoid a potentially awkward social situation. Most people label their casserole dishes and pans, sometimes with an address return label or a piece of tape with their name written on it with the expectation that it will be returned. Another common solution is to purchase disposable aluminum foil pans which can be thrown away once the food has been consumed. Such variations in the tradition reveal an underlying value on the part of the community: those who are grieving need to be cared for and need to have their lives eased as much as possible. In rural Southwest Minnesota, Kris’s production of hot dishes for her community can thus be viewed as an extension of her role as loving mother.

Conclusion

Through examination of the construction of this dish, as performed by Kris, I am able to view how each seemingly ordinary ingredient speaks to a larger sense of both calendrical and cultural time and community. Kris’s approach to hometown cooking stresses control of ingredients best exemplified by her family’s production of food. With each season, the Schmidts engage in a cycle of planting, harvesting, and preserving. Kris’s Tater Tot Hot Dish is a meal imbued with intentionality and careful planning a year, if not more, in advance. Tater Tot Hot Dish also reveals Kris’s participation with her community’s multi-tiered conceptualization of time, an emphasis

on practicality, and the strength of community through celebration and grief. As a symbol of hometown cooking, this meal is more than just an assembly of ingredients. It is union of learned skills and economics oriented towards demonstrating love and care through a warm, and playful, meal.



Figure 11: Kris with her 'Tater Tot Hot Dish. Image by author. 2018.

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Notes

¹ The word “casserole” is rooted in 17th c. French culinary tradition of cooking *en casserole* (*casse* “pan,” *casse-roles* “little *cases*”), or the European style (Villas 2003, xi).

² This study began at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in the fall of 2015, as a foodways course assignment. I had begun researching the culinary history of the Tater Tot Hot Dish, focusing on Kris’s performance of this dish. As my introductory research continued, I expanded on her foodways and how her aesthetic and practical choices affected my home when I was growing up. These essays formed the foundation for my MA thesis for the Department of Comparative Literature and Folklore Studies (Folklore Option) at UW–Madison in 2017. This research was also delivered at the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society and Association for the Study of Food and Society Annual Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, on June 13, 2018.

³ At the Minnesota State Fair, patrons can purchase Tater Tot Hot Dish served to them on a stick, a common theme among festival food at “The Great Minnesota Get Together” (Dregni 2011, 23–26).

⁴ In Tracy, Minnesota, the Pelican Pontoon Pussycats host an annual Tater Tot Hot Dish cooking competition to raise money for local charities (Buntjer 2015). Former Minnesota Senator Al Franken (D) also hosted an annual hot dish competition amongst the state’s members of Congress (Brody 2017).

⁵ Hot dish-centered merchandise is becoming pervasive in Minnesota, from themed dish towels (Minnesota Historical Society 2018) and coffee mugs (Caribou Coffee 2018), to themed (in name at least) beer (Lift Bridge Brewing Company 2018) and wine (Carlos Creek Winery 2018).

⁶ See Theresa Millang and Karen Corbett’s (2017) *The Great Minnesota Hot Dish: Your Cookbook for Classic Comfort Food (Revised and Updated)*.

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