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The rules of potluck dinners

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Shirley Pawlyshyn said, "This is one I enjoyed very much, and I have stuck it on my fridge."

I did not grow up in a potlucking household.

My mother did not trust others to bring food as good as she could prepare herself.

For most of my life, I've felt the same. But not anymore.

When we moved to an Up North village six years ago, I learned that here, potluck rules.

A friend took me aside after we hosted a few dinner parties to explain that it's more polite to do potluck. That way, she said, those with little time, energy or skill can invite you over without shame.

Plus, potlucks can be spontaneous. Somebody at noon can say "How about tonight?" and everybody will show up with an edible something without slaving the whole day.

Now I get it. But I still slip up.

Intimate gathering of 40

A week ago, a friend left a voice message inviting us to a potluck to celebrate the brief return of a dear couple who moved away to Florida.

I assume it will be intimate, maybe eight or 10 friends.

My summer squash casserole is still warm on the floor of the trunk when we pull up to see the barn doors wide open and a dozen tables filling up with what will turn out to be 40 people and their food.

You don't have to be able to feed everyone with your own dish, so I'm OK. But, I forget to bring a serving spoon. Worse, we break Rule No. 1 of potlucks: Bring your own plates and utensils and, to be safe, napkins and glasses.

I pull aside the hostess, who wears a flowered apron and graciously offers loans.

Here are other unwritten rules of potlucks:

- Never point out your own contribution. To brag about it would be grounds for dismissal.
- Don't rave about anything lest those who brought other things feel slighted.
- The cooks are watching, so try to squeeze in a little of everything.
- Don't return for seconds or, worse, scrape the last bit from a bowl until everyone has made the rounds.

To my astonishment, potlucks almost always end up with a balanced amount of meats, salads and desserts. This one includes smoked whitefish, meat loaf, beef stroganoff, roasted chicken, two potato salads, a fresh tomato salad, brownies, pineapple upside-down cake, a cherry-whipped cream concoction and many other things I've forgotten because I (no offense, please) passed them up.

Supper and stories

My hunger sated, I expect the potluck to wind down with the sun, but no.

The hostess stands to announce, "Our program will now begin," then invites everyone to tell a story. To my amazement people take turns, telling stories about here and there, then and now, dear departed villagers and living ones.

One older fellow describes relieving himself at age 8 in a meadow where his buddy suggested he aim for an electric fence.

An urban transplant recalls her surprise at seeing locals write checks to "milkman" because, as a bank teller explained, "We all know who the milkman is."

We laugh and nudge each other and nod. The leftovers grow gross with gelled grease and dead fruit flies.

Then everybody goes home happy, to wash their own plates and forks in their own sinks.