

# Storm Days

## Playing with Food and Time

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Folklorists have explored the many ways that food connects us to the past and how it articulates family, ethnic and regional identities (see Brown and Mussell 1984) but what of its temporal connections to the present? Unlike holidays that have long histories of very particular food rituals associated with them, such as turkey at Thanksgiving or fruitcake at Christmas, storm days—those days when schools and offices are shut down because of a snow storm—are connected to a variety of foods rather than codified by a particular dish. The foodways that characterize these snow days—which usually amount to three or four days during a winter in St. John’s, Newfoundland—contrast to other holidays. They highlight procurement, consumption, and most significantly, preparation, rather than elements such as presentation that are usually associated with ritual meals (Yoder 1972 in Long 2000). Taking up anthropologist David Sutton’s position that foodways have much to teach us, not only at ‘loud’ ritual occasions but in the pragmatic, ritualized aspects of everyday life (Sutton 2001:28), in this research note I reflect on the meanings of food prepared and consumed by twenty-four people during a storm day in St. John’s, Newfoundland on March 7, 2012 (see list of foods at end of research note). Eighteen replied to an email query I sent out on March 8th to faculty, students and staff of the Folklore Department at Memorial University asking what they had eaten during the storm the day before. A similar question posted on Facebook garnered four replies. Finally, I also draw on two callers to “Crosstalk,” an open line show on CBC radio aired March 7th. Both were children who described food they had eaten or prepared during the storm. Roland Barthes writes that when we buy an item of food, consume or serve it, we do not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; “this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies” (1997:21). Here I draw on the eating experiences of these twenty-four people (identified by pseudonyms) to ask what the food prepared and eaten on storm days signifies and in particular what it tells us about the relationship of food to time.

## Embracing Timelessness

The beauty of a snow day is, of course, that everything is cancelled; there is nowhere to go and no outside commitments to keep. Unable to leave your house, and often with the next day’s responsibilities either met or temporarily suspended (I can’t finish my paper because all my books are at the university), the day belongs to you rather than those who usually buy your time. With the demands of Goffman’s front region temporarily lifted, you can set your own agenda in ways that privilege back region pleasures: sleeping in, staying in your pajamas all day, or reading a book just for fun. For a day, as one ten-year-old claimed, “You don’t really keep track of time” (Crosstalk 2012). This breakdown in routine results in one of the greatest gifts of the snow day, time slows down.

Food and food-related activities contribute significantly to an altered sense of time. In his classic essay on the symbolic representation of time, anthropologist Edmund Leach suggested that the modern notion of time embraces repetition. Leach writes, “every interval of time is marked by repetition; it has a beginning and an end which are ‘the same thing’” (1963:126). Our inner biological or circadian clock may be mainly entrained by the repetition of light/dark cycles but it is also strongly affected by the repetition of daily feeding cycles (Mendoza 2006:127). The sense that time slows down on a snow day can be linked in part to an abandoning of the usual meal structure. For example, Martha described her family members as being “on their own” for breakfast and lunch followed by “a simple meal” for supper. Further freedom can come with the consumption of unconventional meals: Paula’s lunch was Doritos– “lots of them.” If we did not know already, Mary Douglas’s famous essay, “Deciphering a Meal,” taught us that Doritos do not constitute a meal. Douglas persuasively argued that a meal conforms to a formula: a stressed main course and two unstressed courses (1997:43). Doritos do not fit the formula; they are lunch but not a “real” lunch.

Edmund Leach also noted that people see themselves positioned in the time process as oscillating between opposites: day and night or life and death (1963:126). On snow days, the normal emphasis on dinner as the day’s most significant meal is disrupted. For several of the people I spoke with about the March 2012 storm, breakfast, the first meal of the day, rather than the last, was what they invested most time and effort in. Anna described a storm day as “a good excuse for a ‘weekend breakfast,’ pancakes, bacon, eggs, etc.” Cathy and Michael detailed the preparation of elaborate breakfasts. Cathy reported, “I decided that a storm day was a good day to make special breakfast (because you can take your time with food prep and eating, on storm days), so I made chocolate crepes. With bananas and yogurt and chocolate shavings. Deeeelicious! My other thought when I woke up was to make French toast but I’ve made that more recently than crepes, and I wanted to make something I don’t usually make.” Michael wrote: “I made Red River cereal with raisins and dried apricots, and yogurt (This takes too long to prepare for a usual weekday breakfast, and my wife is not keen on it anyway, so I’d say this counts as storm-related). And my usual toast and marmalade, and of course the usual strong coffee, without which nothing can happen.” These breakfast meals challenge Mary Douglas’s formula of what constitutes a proper meal. What is this meal? Is it breakfast? Lunch? Supper? As well, eating breakfast later in the day than one would normally may contribute to a sense of time slowing down and of a day that is just beginning even though hours are passing.

Much of what is eaten on snow days mirrors the preparation of breakfasts in that it is more time consuming than what would be prepared on a usual weekday morning. For example, Michael also made a beef stew, Nina cooked up a pot of chili, and Cliff prepared a version of his favorite Cuban dish, Spanish-style chickpeas. He did this in a crockpot, starting the meal at 9:00 am and eating it for supper at 7:00 pm. Often food preparation on a snow day is slow.

## Play

Within a larger context of timelessness, snow days create opportunities for play: bounded, voluntary, free, and satisfying activities that contrast to everyday responsibilities (see Huizinga 1950). There is time to do a crossword puzzle, watch a movie, or even play Monopoly. For some, food becomes part of this play. Time-consuming dishes like home-made pasta transform food preparation into recreation. Jennifer described spending part of the day on a labour intensive lasagne sauce because as she notes, “the storm day bought me some time I didn’t expect to have,” while Maggie’s room-mates devoted three hours to making home-made ravioli. Others engaged in recreational baking. Anna claimed, “I almost always bake something during a snow day” and several people spoke of often baking bread. During the March snow storm, Brenda made a cake which she served with blueberries, partridgeberries and yogurt; Alice made a batch of chocolate chip cookies “because she had time” and Eve baked oatmeal chocolate chip muffins. Eve, the mother of a one-year-old actually spent most of her day in the kitchen producing a series of elaborate dishes: “By 9:00 am I was resigned to being trapped in my kitchen for the rest of day. I say kitchen because we have an open living room/kitchen space which is now essentially one giant playroom for Sarah. I can’t read, I can’t watch TV, but I can bake and cook while still keeping an eye on Sarah.” In addition to muffins, Eve prepared a lentil nut loaf complete with home-made bread crumbs and made an Israeli couscous salad with roasted tomatoes and zucchini which had marinated in a Dijon vinaigrette. She also roasted beets. Although Eve’s daughter was too young to help, others baked as a shared activity: Maggie’s room-mates worked together to produce the home-made ravioli while an eight-year-old girl who phoned in to the open-line radio show, Crosstalk, was looking forward to making muffins with her mother that afternoon.

Eve jokingly suggested that “the blizzard set me into some kind of survival cooking mode” but slowly made food does recall an earlier way of life. There is a sense in which people, like Michael with his homey beef stew that he claimed not to have made in many years, are playing at a more labour intensive type of home-making than they usually engage in. It speaks to the commemorative function of food identified by Barthes: “food permits a person...to partake of the national past,” Barthes wrote. He continued, “food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized. In this manner, food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life” (1997:24).

Much of the food prepared during the March snow storm was simmered, baked or roasted. It as if this food, or even the smell of food baking or slowly cooking, provides psychological protection against the elements; in Lévi-Strauss’s terms, the roasting might bring us closer to nature, the power of which cannot be denied on a snow day. “Mon pays, ce n’est un pays, c’est l’hiver” (My country is not a country, it’s winter”) penned Québec songwriter Gilles Vigneault in his song that has achieved the status of a Canadian national anthem. Vigneault relies on the winter as a metaphor for aspects of Canadian life, including the cultural isolation of northern Quebec in the 1960s. But he also summons up positive connotations; he promises to remain faithful and hospitable like his father before him who built a home there. It is an approach echoed by Adam Gopnik in his 2011 Massey lectures, “Winter: Five Windows on the Season,” where he explores the central theme that “winter started as this thing we

had to get through; it has ended as this time to hold on to” (Gopnik 2011). Gopnik’s “windows” include the recreational winter, the recuperative winter and the process of remembering winter.

The meal in the crockpot connects the cook and/or those who eat it in a playful way to earlier generations of Canadians who have met the challenge of winter blizzards. It breaks down usual barriers of time to create commonality across centuries. The food helps to create a sense of *communitas* not only among members of a household who share it but among all those through Canadian history who battled extreme weather. We are in this together. It also contributes to an altered sense of time, and perhaps a sense of timelessness in that these are not the foods of our time. In contrast to the fast, industrial, convenience, ready-made, or prepared deli foods that characterize food consumption patterns in 2012 (see Jabs and Devine 2006), storm day food harkens back to an earlier time when food was made from scratch and at home. The dishes prepared and eaten on storm days help to create a time out of time.

## Nurturing

Snow day food also makes temporal connections with more personal and less remote pasts. Consistent with Linda Kulman’s observation that people associate the consumption of simple foods with nostalgia (Kulman 2000), several people prepared simple food that signified their childhood. Judith made a breakfast dish for her husband and young child that she called “hole in the middle.” She described it as “fried toast with the center torn out and a fried egg in the hole - lots of butter!” Jean reported, “I ate a peanut butter and banana sandwich on toast (which I rarely eat because I’m not a fan of bananas but it’s one of those foods that makes me feel like a little kid being taken care of again!)” Others made fried potatoes, a fried ham sandwich, and pasta with cheese, which although they did not link specifically to childhood may well have been connected to it. This may have been true for Judith as well when she ate several slices of home-made molasses bread and for the three people who baked chicken: crispy coated baked chicken, Shake n’ Bake chicken and baked chicken breast. Certainly there are childhood favorites among the dishes people described “usually making” on a storm day: shepherd’s pie, beef pot pie, macaroni and canned tomatoes, and other forms of pasta. Snow day food takes people back in time. It supports David Sutton’s argument that the transitory and repetitive act of eating is a medium for the more enduring act of remembering that is intricately connected to identity (Sutton 2001:2). Sutton contends that food creates the experience of synesthesia (the crossing of experiences from different sensory registers: taste, smell, and hearing) that allows individuals to “return to the whole” (Sutton 2001:17). Snow day food becomes an articulation of who we are, or maybe more accurately who we were but don’t want to forget.

On the March 2012 storm day, an element of indulgence characterized much of the food and drink people consumed: chocolate crepes, fried scallops, brie and crackers, cupcakes, a nip of port, hot chocolate, tea with vanilla sugar, and coffee laced with liqueur. It is common to stock up on groceries the day before a winter storm is forecast—although power outages lasting more than a few hours are

not usual, they are certainly possible—and stores are usually crowded. This means that cupboards are often well stocked with appropriate storm day foods. As Susan noted, “It is customary in my household that if we are expecting to have a snow day we stock up on junk food—chips, dip, munchies for the day and usually have pizza or hamburgers and fries or something like that.” It would be interesting to track eating habits over the course of a winter’s worth of storms to see of the nature of supplies purchased for a snow day change. The March storm at the focus of this paper was obviously very late, the last of three or four that year and Susan, as well as one other person in the group I’m drawing on, specifically mentioned they had not stocked up with the usual vigour. Nonetheless, the liminality of the storm day that means you are free to do what you want when you want to do it, extends to food (See Jobs and Devine 2006 for discussion of time and food choices). Most people described making and eating food that they enjoyed and regarded as special in some way.

Because freedom and pleasure is found in snow day food, it provides insight into how context affects what constitutes “good” food or “comfort food” (Murcott 1993). At first glance, storm day food seems to challenge the findings of earlier studies that report a gendered breakdown in terms of what is considered comfort food (men prefer warm, hearty meal-related foods such as casseroles and soup while women opt for the more snack related foods such as chocolate and ice cream) as well as age preferences (younger people prefer snack-related comfort foods compared to those over fifty-five years of age) (See Wansink et al 2003). Those findings certainly do not describe what the twenty-four people here ate during the March 2012 storm. On the other hand, these storm day experiences do support the idea that consumers continually incorporate manufactured products into “family traditions” (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). During this blizzard, at least, both men and women and eaters of all ages combined modernity (in the form of store bought cookies or candy) with tradition (in the form of beef stew or baked chicken).

What we consider family leisure, such as holiday celebrations, is actually a form of women’s work (see Bella 1992). Women often invest huge amounts of labour in recreating holidays because of their benefits for family identity. In contrast, snow days emphasize the importance of nurturing the self as much as strengthening familial bonds. Rather than contained in one single dish, snow day food emphasizes desired qualities and characteristics: the hot, the sweet, the baked or complex flavours slowly cooked. This food can nurture relationships with others in the home and with one’s past; its procurement, preparation and/or consumption are relational. It can also represent a time of personal freedom. As food that allows for both pause and play, it is restorative, feeding the soul and preparing bodies for return to the everyday world.

## Conclusion

Storm day foodways function with the same temporal complexity as Pravina Shukla observed that clothing and adornment does for men and women in India. It allows individuals “[to] position themselves at once in different temporal realms, some broad and historical, others intimate and

personal” (Shukla 2005:4). In the foods prepared and eaten during snow storms modernity and tradition merge; foods remembered from childhood include home cooked dishes and commercial foods and indulgences stretch from the refined nip of port to a home-baked cake to the purchased bag of Doritos. An example of Roland Barthes’s argument that “food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (1997:26), the food prepared and eaten on storm days is more about process than an actual dish that has become codified as snow day food. It is more about what the food signifies big and small—relaxation, childhood, home, the past, Canada—than the actual signifier: cupcakes, chicken, or chili. Through aspects, from method of cooking (roasting, baking, frying), temperature (warm or hot), and speed of preparation (slow), to meal structure (relaxed, breakfast or slowly prepared cooked dinner), and the food itself (high fat or high carbohydrate, complex flavours), these foodways connect us synchronically to those who share our home, diachronically to others who came before us, and symbolically to Canadians who have been shaped by the same harsh elements. Its lack of temporal fixedness mirrors the liminality of the storm itself that separates us from the rest of the world and temporarily frees us from time. Seen as an expression of critical nostalgia (Cashman 2006), food prepared and served on snow days speaks of the need for taking time for each other and for ourselves.

## Foods Eaten on Storm Day, St. John’s, Newfoundland, March 7, 2012

### *Breakfast*

Holes in the middle

Chocolate crepes with bananas, yogurt and chocolate shavings

Red River cereal with raisins and dried apricots and yogurt, toast and marmalade and coffee

Bacon and eggs

Boiled egg and whole wheat toast

Pancakes

French toast

Family members on their own.

### *Lunch*

Nice salad

Soup and sandwiches

Scallops, pea pods, and fried potatoes, cheese and biscuits

Diva Delights peppery pecan crisp bread and almonds

Pasta with cheese

Brie and rice crackers

Fried ham sandwiches with yogurt

Toasted peanut butter and banana sandwich

Family members on their own

Chili

### *Supper*

Beef stew, bread and red wine. Cake with blueberries/partridgeberries and yogurt

Home-made ravioli

Pasta with bacon, mushrooms, peppers

Spanish-style chickpeas in crockpot with garlic, onion, chipotle peppers, shredded sweet potato, cumin and spinach

Shake n' Bake chicken with basmati rice, fried broccoli, carrots, opinions, mushrooms, green and red peppers

Crispy coated baked chicken with mashed potatoes and corn

Chicken breast, salad, asparagus

Perogies with fried onions, fried pork and sour cream

Lentil nut loaf (with homemade bread crumbs); Israeli couscous salad (with roasted tomatoes and zucchini marinated in Dijon vinaigrette)

### *Snacks*

Oranges

Chocolate covered almonds, popcorn

Purity jam jam cookies

Muffins

Sweet Chili Heat Doritos

Cupcakes

Carrot sticks

Home-Made molasses bread toasted with butter and molasses

### *Drinks*

Nip of Port

Hot chocolate

Disaronno in coffee

Two cups of coffee and a cup of tea with new home-made vanilla sugar

Hot chocolate

### *Food people "usually" make and/or consume*

"Munchies like chips, dip etc and junk food like pizza or hamburgers and fries for supper"

Shepherd's pie or a beef pot pie

Macaroni and canned tomatoes; Lipton's chicken noodle soup; breakfast sausages; cereal, and pretzels

Chili (one person had made it so many times they call it "storm chili")

Toast and tea

Home-baked bread

Drink or two

“Comfort food”: cake or brownies, something warm and comforting usually pasta; weekend breakfast, eg. pancakes, bacon, eggs etc.

“I usually bake something”

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