



HOT DISH¹

Oz Spies

Grease your casserole

Put in casserole frozen french fries to cover bottom²

Brown 1 good size onion and 1 ½ # Hamburger, 1 cup celery – (cut up), 1 can mushrooms (small) and add salt and pepper

Put on top of french fries³

add - 1 can cream of mushroom and 1 can cream chicken soup

But don't dilute soup,

Put Tater Tots⁴ on top and bake in oven 350° until brown (Don't overbake! - 45 minutes and see _____ You may not need all of the soups - "u can see"⁵

¹As written, for my mother, by my great-grandmother Esther on a recipe card in 1979. During my childhood, I often ate tuna-noodle casserole, French fries, Tater Tots, mounds of green vegetables, and out-of-season strawberries, but not this dish. Two types of fried potatoes must have been too much for my mother, who made loaves of bread, vats of fragrant soup from scratch, and insisted we regularly eat that supposedly healthy food I hated most: mushy, musty cooked orange squash. I can't imagine my mother asked for the Hot Dish recipe and the crocheted pastel doilies intended to fancy up end tables my great-grandmother sent along with it. In 1979, my mother was chasing after two toddlers and used a La Leche League cookbook with recipes for dry spelt cookies. My brother and I were allergic to cow's milk—something discovered after weeks of an elimination diet of nothing but rice and chicken, during which my usually healthy mother snuck away from her sickly toddlers to eat the cheeseburger she craved—and couldn't have eaten cream-of-anything.

²Esther suggested my mother name me Hannah Karoline—emphasizing Karoline with a K, not a pedestrian C. She wrote in spindly cursive, so old-fashioned that I, an eight-year-old heart-dotted "i" aficionado and scrawler of bubble letters, could not read my own name—which is not Hannah Karoline. She spelled my mother's name Karin, though it is and always has been Karen with an "e." I assumed all old people wrote illegibly and got away with spelling people's names wrong. They had lived a long time. They'd earned the right to spell however they liked, and never had to study words like "February" for spelling tests, yet you still had to write them thank-you notes for any little thing they sent you. I imagined that, once you reached 65 or so, you could just write Feb. or Febuary and no one would dare to mention it. You aged out of spelling, grammar, and editing.

³My family visited her one summer during a family reunion. We all gathered in my great grandparents' small Minnesota one-restaurant town, where the owner, Margie, might give you a menu touting buttermilk pancakes and omelets, but would then tell you you were going to have two eggs over easy with a side of white toast. It didn't matter that you only ate whole wheat toast, or that your mother said whole wheat toast was better for you. It was that kind of a restaurant.

⁴Mosquitoes outnumbered people by the thousands. The thick, wet air clung to me as I climbed, with my cousins, on the floral couch at the lake house. I remember my great-grandmother making scalloped potatoes and Swedish meatballs, despite the summer heat. It was too hot to turn on a stove, yet I recall her standing in the yellow kitchen, mixing bread crumbs and ground meat, an apron around her waist. Later, I remember sitting at a card table and forcing down bites of everything but the cheese-covered potatoes in an effort to be polite. I don't know if that's true, or if I'm blending memories of different visits: confusing my great-grandmother's hands molding meatballs, the blue veins dull under thin wrinkled skin, with her daughter's—my grandmother's—or picturing a floral apron in Minnesota when it's an apron in my grandmother's familiar Southern California kitchen.

⁵That's the way all my memories of her seem to be—a fuzzy blend of colors, other family members, and an itching sensation from the effort of trying to behave and not break anything. I was so busy trying to be good that I couldn't taste the food that she made, or ask her questions about her life running the small town's general store. We communicated by trinkets, occasional hugs, and thank-you notes. Lined up, the four of us—Esther, her daughter Aina, my mother, and me—looked like Russian nesting dolls of different ages, all fair skin, small noses and bow-shaped lips. But my great-grandmother and I were at opposite ends of the chain, and we didn't even know what kinds of food the other ate. ❧