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The January Thaw has come and gone so it seems like as good a time as any to talk about power outages. After all it is snow season and at least one big nor'easter is bound to tear through New England at some point this winter. Maybe two. Or more. As a skier, I will always hope.

I'm thinking that we can improve our chances for an outage-free winter if we prepare early and often. Think of it as an extension of the bring-your-umbrella-and-it-won't-rain hypothesis. So here goes ...



Get a good head start on the inevitable,

1. Test your generator to make sure it works before the power goes out. If you don't have a generator, think about buying one.
2. If you have an electric stove, switch to gas. If you like to cook, you'll be glad you made the change. Otherwise, think about a camp stove. Before you decide not to bother, remember your morning coffee.
3. So what do you do if you can't face the day without coffee and your fancy machine needs electricity? Buy the old-fashioned version which best fits your taste – be it a simple drip cone, French press or my favorite Italian stovetop espresso maker.
4. Unless you have a smart phone, invest in a battery operated radio for storm updates (and music).
5. Be prepared for longer outages, the ones which lasts more than a day or two, with a cell phone charger for the car.
6. Stock up on candles and flashlights. A headlight, the kind for your head not the car, is great for reading as well as wandering around the house or yard in the dark. An oil lamp is also good. Don't forget to stock up on extra wicks and plenty of oil.
7. And if you want the radio and flashlights to work, don't forget batteries.

As soon as the weather people begin to talk excitedly of an impending storm,

8. Dig out the shovels and check the snow blower. Make sure you have plenty of gas and oil for the snow blower. It might be a good idea to have sand or de-icer or kitty litter to throw down after shoveling.
9. Fill the car with gas and look under all the seats for the snow brush and scraper. If you can't find it buy a new one while you're at the gas station.
10. Check your cell phone, I-pod, laptop and whatever toys and tools you can't live without. Make sure they are fully charged.
11. If you have well water, fill any and all pitchers, carafes, jugs, empty soda bottles and large containers, including the bath tub, with water.
12. Make soup or better yet chili, something hearty and lots of it.
13. Stop by the library and/or bookstore and stock up on all those books you've been dying to read.
14. Depending on your inclination, check your supply of wine and/or chocolate and stock up as needed. Don't skimp, you never know how long you might be left in the dark.

In case you are wondering about my preparations. Well I figure just talking and writing about it must be worth something.

Bon appétit!



Red Bean Chili with Pork and Butternut Squash

Invite the neighbors in after shoveling – everyone appreciates a bowl or mug of chili on a snowy day. Add more or less spice to taste and enjoy!

Serves 8-10

2 pounds boneless pork shoulder, cut into 1-2 inch cubes
Olive oil

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

2 large onions, chopped

2 carrots, finely chopped

2 stalks celery, finely chopped

2 teaspoons ground cumin

1 teaspoon (or to taste) chili powder

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 tablespoon (or to taste) chipotle chilies in adobo, mashed to a paste

1 tablespoon (or to taste) finely chopped jalapeno

4 garlic cloves, minced

5-6 cups small red beans, cooked, rinsed and drained

4 cups canned crushed tomatoes

1-2 cups chicken stock

3/4 cup dry white wine

1 bay leaf

1 pound butternut squash, peeled, seeded and cut into bite-size pieces

1 pound frozen spinach

Sour cream (optional)

Shredded cheddar cheese (optional)

Toasted pumpkin seeds

Chopped cilantro

Heat a little olive oil in a large casserole over medium-high heat. Pat the pork dry and season with salt and pepper. Brown the pork in batches, remove from the casserole and reserve.

Adding more oil if necessary, put the onion, carrot, celery, spices and herbs in the casserole, season with salt and pepper and sauté for 7-8 minutes. Add the chipotle, jalapeno and garlic and sauté 2-3 minutes more.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Add the pork, beans, crushed tomatoes, chicken stock, wine and bay leaf to the vegetables and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Cover the casserole and transfer to the oven. Cook at 350 degrees, stirring occasionally, until the pork is tender, about 1 1/2 hours.

Meanwhile, heat a little olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Sauté the butternut squash for a few minutes or until lightly caramelized but still firm. Add the squash to the chili and continue simmering for 10-15 minutes. Add the spinach and cook for 5 minutes more.

Serve the chili garnished with sour cream, cheddar, pumpkin seeds and cilantro.

The chili can be made one day ahead. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate. Reheat on medium or in a 350 degree oven, stirring several times, until bubbly.

