*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic)*Inter-County Leader

**Enjoying a 'hot pot' with old friends in Toronto**

A few weeks ago, I went to Toronto to visit my buddies from my old school.

I went to a Catholic boys school in Hong Kong; yes, all boys, from first grade to graduation. That was some experience indeed. A few of my buddies attended the same class with me since we were 10 or 12 years old. Goodness, that’s half a century ago! Totally amazing! When we get together, we just chat, drink, eat, sing and reminisce. Then we do that over and over again the next few nights with different foods and different drinks; yet, still sharing the same stories. What a fun time indeed!

There is an old Chinese saying:

“Drinking wine with your bosom buddies, a thousand glasses is not enough,
Chatting with a stranger that you hardly know, half a sentence is too much.”

So, what is a thousand glasses!

Living in the Northwoods, everyone is from here and they all know each other. Conversation is easy, as you do not have to ask, “Where are you from?” or “What do you do for a living?” or “What do you like to do for fun?”

I like the fact that no one here cares about the basic content of normal conversation I used to be involved in: “How big is your home?” or “What kind of car do you drive?” or “What social clubs do you belong to?”or “What are your favorite restaurants (five stars, of course)?”

They would be flaunting their Rolex watches and Gucci purses with their Mont Blanc pens gleaming from their shirt pocket. Goodness, I hated that. To me, success these days is how big of a fish you catch. A walleye? Largemouth bass? Northern pike? What, a 15-pound pike? Wait, how did you do it? What bait did you use? Where is the sacred hotspot? Share with me, please, please, please. (Geezer Bob, are you listening?)

How life has changed. I had never used a rifle for hunting, but I did catch a 50-pound turkey with my windshield once. So, am I qualified to be a local?

When China took over Hong Kong years ago, a lot of the population didn’t know what to expect so they decided to find a new home somewhere else. The horror stories of the communists when they first took over still lingered — many of the family and relatives were persecuted and executed during the revolution as they were landlords and business owners. Just how times have changed. Now you can own shops and land, and invest in stocks and bonds. One can own factories, farms, homes and businesses these days in China. But who’s to know?

I was told that the Chinese food is the best in Toronto, as a lot of chefs from China and Hong Kong have emigrated there. Having lived in Milwaukee for years, we had to drive to Chicago Chinatown to get a good dim sum feast or a decent Chinese meal. Here in the Northwoods, driving to the Twin Cities is only an hour away. That seems like nothing now. Before we moved here from Milwaukee, driving 20 minutes to go anywhere seemed like a long haul. Again, how life changes.

I was told that if you eat at a Chinese restaurant in Toronto every night, it will take over one year just to experience each restaurant at least once. Good Lord, how can it be possible? But then again, there are restaurants that serve Cantonese, Hunan, Szechuan, Beijin and many other specialties. I just have to stay longer next time.

I was there for only five days, but goodness, it felt like five weeks or more. Knowing that I was deprived of good authentic Chinese foods living in the Northwoods, my buddies arranged different foods for me to try every day including a dim sum feast, congee, wonton noodles, braised beef brisket, a five-pound lobster feast, steamed black bass in ginger scallion sauce, roast piglet, Peking duck ... and my favorite, which is “hot pot.”

Our hot pot was enjoyed on a hot early-summer night and I had a spicy soup for my soup base. We all had our own soup pot, which is different. In the old days, there would be one pot with a tall chimney, filled with steaming soup and set in the middle of the table, and everybody used the same soup to cook their food. The intimacy was gone, but it is the new trend, so what the heck.

I was sweating the whole time, even though the air conditioning in the restaurant was going full blast. But no complaints here. I had done a hot pot feast at my house to welcome the new year. I think I like that better, even though the food at the restaurant was a bit better. They had beef, pork and lamb shaved in a roll, and they would be cooked once you twirled them in the hot pot for 10 seconds. However, I still think that sharing a hot pot is more of a family feast.

I waited for weeks for the day to come to head to Toronto, yet it was time to go home within the blink of an eye. I love visiting my buddies, but Toronto is too fast-paced for me. It is like living in the Twin Cities. Now, why would I do that?

I get white knuckles each time I drive to visit my son’s family in Minnesota. Holy smokes, how can they be driving 80 mph when the speed limit clearly states 65 mph?! I don’t mind those cars speeding by me, but I don’t like their dirty looks when they pass me. Thank goodness my buddies drove me around in Toronto — I don’t know how many dirty looks I would have gotten had I driven.

Toronto is a great city indeed, hence it attracts folks from all over the world to reside there, just like the Twin Cities. While waiting in line to board the plane, I heard at least 10 different languages including English, French, Korean, Japanese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, German and a few that I didn’t recognize. What a great melting pot.

I love visiting my buddies, the great camaraderie, the great food and all the great times of singing and drinking ... yet, I miss my home. Yes, Northwoods is home.