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Those hotshots may know pizza, but not St. Paul

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nick coleman columnist

My topic is Meryl Streep's choice of pizza, but first, my report on the movie stars who blew through St. Paul the other night.

I mean that literally.

I had a child strapped to my back for ballast and held on to a lamppost to withstand the gale as horse-drawn carriages bore scantily clad Hollywood personages through a brisk May evening of the type that led our grandparents to warn us not to put the long johns away until Memorial Day.

Even that is risky. Anyone who froze during the June 1990 visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev knows long undies must always be kept at hand.

Wednesday's parade of goose-bumped stars made a five-block dash to a premiere of Garrison Keillor's new movie, "A Prairie Home Companion," with 81-year-old director Robert Altman clutching a tissue to his nose and looking as if he was being driven to his doom. Someone forgot to give these skinny people buffalo robes.

A few stars, ignoring the fans, frantically talked on cell phones (calling ahead for hot water bottles) while I tried to figure out which one was Lindsay somebody. It was fun, but nothing like the excitement back in the

days when Hoss from "Bonanza" might be Winter Carnival grand marshal.

I have seen bigger crowds at the School Patrol Parade.

Still, I always enjoy the looks on the faces of visitors to St. Paul, the City of Surprises. They often appear stunned or dumbfounded, as if they cannot account for why they are here. Even if they have only wandered over from Edina.

Take what happened to Streep, one of the actors in Keillor's movie. She came to St. Paul last year to make the movie and was gobsmacked to find the "best pizza" she ever ate.

Now, Meryl Streep is a New Jersey girl who knows her pizza.

When she gushed about the fabulous pizza she discovered in St. Paul (where pizza is the biggest part of the food pyramid), her remarks touched off a frenzy among the pizzarazzi who pestered her for the name of the pie shop she had visited.

But like many visitors to St. Paul, Streep didn't remember where she had been or how she got there. It was near a hill, she said. Or a lake. Maybe a fountain. You went up one hill and down another and took a right and there it was. Maybe.

She could just have said it would be found in a public park somewhere in Ramsey County, so we could wait for Clue No. 12 or someone to trip over it.

Did she mean the Italian Pie Shoppe? Green Mill? Grampa Tony's? Carbone's? Watering mouths needed to know.

I can now report that Streep

was referring to Punch Neapolitan Pizza in Highland Park. There is no fountain nearby, or lakes. But there is a pond at St. Catherine's just up Cleveland Avenue. And Streep visited Punch several times last year.

Punch bakes pizza in a wood-fired brick oven exactly as it is done in Naples, where pizza was invented, using methods set in law by the Italian government to preserve pizza for generations unborn. Conveniently, it is a few doors from a weight-loss clinic.

Punch has stores in Eden Prairie and Minneapolis, too, but St. Paul's is the original, and I'm glad a movie star stumbled into it, however she got there. If I had seen her, I would have suggested the San Siro pizza. I order it "wet."

This is classic St. Paul:

People arrive with low expectations, but stumble upon greatness. They aren't sure where they are, and they can't explain how they got there. But they can't wait to get back.

And we are always glad to see them again. Even though they often are underdressed.

One last word: Actor John C. Reilly also praised St. Paul, saying, "No one will beep at you" if you sit in your car at a green light and fail to move.

Reilly is one of my favorite actors. But I don't know what town he was in. And I bet he doesn't either. I know this, though: It wasn't St. Paul.

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