

Dish Omaha – September 17th, 2025

Jeff: It's Dish Omaha featuring KVNO's resident foodie, Diane Watson. Good morning, Diane.

Diane: Good morning, Jeff. Today we are talking about buffets. Now, the origin of the word buffet, this is a softball for you. What's the word origin? Where does the word buffet come from?

Jeff: I actually don't know.

Diane: It's French.

Jeff: I knew it's French, but I didn't know if it had a different meaning.

Diane: I was trying to just give you an easy one.

Jeff: Oh, thank you.

Diane: So, the original word buffet meant a bench or a sideboard, and it later evolved to mean a meal from a self-service table. So, buffets were born around communal times, but they really took off in the 16th century in Sweden with what was called a brandvisbord. So, it was a board with bread and cheese and meat. What does that sound like?

Jeff: I think I got that one, charcuterie.

Diane: Yeah, exactly. It sounds just like charcuterie. And later that evolved into smorgasbord, which was actually people pre-gaming dinner with a variety of dishes beforehand. So, you can kind of see where the excess came from. In 1912, the Olympics were held in Sweden. Guess what they served that then became crazy around the world? Smorgasbord. Exactly.

Jeff: And that's sort of what brought it to prominence?

Diane: Exactly. And in 1939, the World's Fair in New York, they had a Swedish pavilion showcasing the smorgasbord. So, the very next year, an entrepreneur named Herb MacDonald introduced the first all-you-can-eat smorgasbord. That's a hard word to say. Guess where? What's known for buffets?

Jeff: Probably someplace with a casino, Vegas.

Diane: Exactly. It was the first all-you-can-eat buffet in Las Vegas. It was called the Buckaroo Buffet.

Jeff: Buckaroo Buffet.

Diane: I know, right? It was a dollar. A dollar for all-you-can-eat. And like many other buffets that came after, it was kind of a loss leader. But the buffet didn't need to make money because the casino made all the money. The biggest kind of national smorgasbord or buffet was the Golden Corral. Started in 1973. And then there was CeCe's, you probably remember

them. Started in 1985. And then one of the first well-known restaurants to create a buffet was Pizza Hut.

Jeff: I remember that one well.

Diane: Oh, I do too. I loved that. And then hotels really became big in the buffet business. They really kind of waned in the 1980s, and then something happened to all of us in 2020 that kind of shut all buffets down. I don't know if you remember COVID. So, in Omaha, we talked a few months ago about Bishop's, one of the favorite buffets and cafeterias in the city. But there's one I had not heard of called the Fireside Restaurant. It started in 1958. It was at 38th and Leavenworth, and it was the very first buffet in Omaha.

Jeff: Huh.

Diane: And then lots of other buffets came in, really started by immigrants, to showcase their own types of cuisine. And if you think about it, those are the kind of buffets we still see around today. A lot of Asian buffets, Chinese buffets, Indian buffets, one of my absolute favorites. And I think one that...

Jeff: It's a great way to try different kinds of things.

Diane: I couldn't agree more. Things that you what you might not order, and you might not even know what they are, but it gives you an opportunity to, as you say, try and get outside of your comfort zone. And then one of my favorites as a kid was Valentino's Grand Italian Buffet.

Jeff: Oh yeah. Grand Italian Buffet.

Diane: Do you remember that?

Jeff: Of course I do.

Diane: 75 items, and it's still, I looked up, I searched their website. You can still get it if you want to go to Kearney or you want to go to Nebraska City.

Jeff: Oh, with the actual buffet?

Diane: Yeah, exactly. One of the most interesting around is the Golden Apple Buffet in Papillion. I don't know if you've been there. They have a hundred and fifty items. So, lots and lots of Asian food, lots of sushi. It's tremendous, and it's really worth a lunch or dinner turn. Newer trends have included Mongolian grills like HuHut. You might have noticed that the... the logo for Huhat is Genghis Khan. And the reason is Mongolian grill got its name because Genghis Khan used to cook food on his shield when he was at war.

Jeff: Wow.

Diane: He would use that as a, and so you know, Mongolian grill, you pick the raw food and they cook it for you.

Jeff: Yeah yeah.

Diane: Not on a shield.

Jeff: Not on a shield.

Diane: But on a big flat bed.

Jeff: Bring your own shield.

Diane: Right, perfect. And then the Brazilian steakhouse is a trend that's really come to Omaha, like Texas Day Brazil. I went there for the first time. It was, it was fantastic. The last thing I'll say is if you want to try the biggest smorgasbord in the United States, you can go to Shady Maple in Pennsylvania. 200 feet of buffet counters.

Jeff: Not 200 options.

Diane: 200 feet. Oh, and a quick program note, reminder, Restaurant Week is still going on through Sunday, so hit it.

Jeff: All right, Diane Watson, thanks so very much.