

How America's Largest Buffet Survived The Death Of All-You-Can-Eats Big Business (18:08)

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This is the kitchen behind America's largest buffet. Shady Maple in Pennsylvania serves about 1.2 million people a year.

"There's 20 trays. Every piece has to be laid out individually."

Customers travel from all over the country to chow down on this 200-foot buffet.

"You come here, you eat until you start laughing."

"Oh my God, I don't even have enough hands."

It will just set you back \$16 on a Saturday morning. "I feel like it sums up American culture so well. Lots of cheap food."

"Come on into Old Country Buffet."

All-you-can-eats like this used to be all the rage across the US. Even big chains like Pizza Hut and KFC got in on the trend. But especially in the last decade, buffets have stumbled. Their US market size is down roughly 30 percent since 2012. But this place, Shady Maple, has thrived. On average, 4,000 people come here every day to eat. So what happened to the all-American all-you-can-eat? And why, against all odds, has Shady Maple kept the big business of buffets alive?

"Now, that? Crispy."

I met with Sumer Smith, Shady Maple's food-quality manager, bright and early on a Saturday morning.

"Good morning!" "Good morning!"

"Just gotta get to you."

"Yeah, got a little maze." "Yeah."

The cooks start prep at 4 am.

“We’ll go through about 700 to 750 pounds of bacon.”

Saturdays are their busiest days as they race to prep for 8,000 people.

“We’re going to be going that way.”

“Oh, the energy is high. It’s like our Super Bowl.”

The chefs cook a ton of different dishes from American to Pennsylvania Dutch fare, honoring the Mennonite and Amish traditions of the area, like this local delicacy called scrapple.

“Liver, and it’s ground up.”

At the fryer station, they crisp up sausage patties and links. On the griddles, chefs drop hundreds of pancakes. This line is for egg dishes. Sumer and her team go through over 700 eggs for a Saturday breakfast. On the other side of the kitchen, this team starts cutting veggies for lunch.

“They’ll set up this chopper. The broccoli, cauliflower, they chop by hand.”

“It’s a lot of prep.”

By 8 am, the line wrapped around the lobby, and I was getting a little hungry, so it was time to check out the buffet myself.

“Hi.”

“How many for you?”

“Just one.”

“Just one today? That’s going to be seventeen sixty nine (\$17.69). Credit?”

“Gotcha.”

“Is there a time limit?”

“There is not a time limit. You can stay as long as you’d like. Just if you want to stay past 11 o’clock, that’s when we switch over to our lunch buffet.”

(cont)

“There you go. There’s your ticket. Head down there, you can get seated by a hostess, and they will let you know how everything works.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Enjoy it. You are welcome.”

“Can I get an omelet with everything on it?”

“One chocolate chip?” “Thank you!”

This is like childhood right here. Jiggle! Scrapple. She said this was a Pennsylvania favorite. Can never have too much bacon. Dutch fries. You need a little line bacon to hold you over for the table bacon, you know. I have no shame. Let’s go!

All right. Got the first round. The cinnamon syrup was too much. That is the thickest omelet. I’m going to crush it in like 30 seconds flat. I’m going to try the Pennsylvania Dutch scrapple. And just like, it’s literally just a patty of, like, pork. She said liver is in it, all that stuff. Baked French toast. Whoa! Mm! Okay, that’s good! I’m going to try this whoopie pie. Mm. Oh man, I am covered in chocolate. Flip this slip over when you’re finished dining and no tipping, please. I mean, look at this spread. Like, if you wanted to try everything, you’re inevitably not going to be able to finish it all.

What’s really mind-boggling? All of this was just \$16. And those affordable prices are why Americans fell in love with buffets to begin with.

Buffets can be traced back to 18-century Sweden, where elites feasted on large spreads called *smörgåsbords*. Around the same time, the French laid out their fancy meals of their own. That’s actually where we got the name for buffet, after the French word for sideboard, where the food was served. But it was a Las Vegas casino manager who brought the idea to the American masses in 1946 with a 24-hour buffet that cost just a dollar.

“And that was something that didn’t make him a lot of money. Herb’s buffet was meant to attract people there, and then they would stay and eat and then eventually gamble, and that’s where the casino made its money.”

In the 1970s, buffet chains started to spread across the US.

“Golden Corral. Delightful. Delectable.”

“At Old Country Buffet, kids always get what they want.”

The restaurants could keep meal prices affordable because they had heavy foot traffic and low labor costs.

“It doesn’t take very many people to run a Golden Corral compared to a fancy restaurant.”

There weren’t as many servers, and a smaller kitchen staff cooked in big batches. While a chef in a sit-down restaurant can cook for 25 people in an hour, a buffet chef can serve two hundred.

“The profit margins at these places were razor-thin, but it is definitely something that gets customers in the door. And for a lot of restaurants, that’s challenge number one.”

By the 1980s, buffets were a roaring success.

“The key part of the American dream is having excess, right? Having lots of stuff. And in a way, an all-you-can-eat buffet fits perfectly in with that.”

“You know Wendy’s SuperBar is great for families because there’s something for everyone.”

The concept was so successful that big brands like KFC and Wendy’s hopped in on the trend.

“I went to Pizza Hut regularly in high school for the buffet because it was cool as a high school kid to gorge yourself with pizza.”

Shady Maple's founder started the buffet at the height of all-you-can-eats in 1985. From a small roadside veggie stand in the '60s, their new 300-seat buffet concept was a quick hit. One-and-a-half hour waits were common.

But soon, all-you-can-eats stumbled across the country. In the era of fad diets, customers opted for healthier options. Then, ...

"Into the '90s especially, there are a number of fairly high-profile incidents involving kind of mass food poisoning at these places."

In 2000, a Milwaukee Sizzler was responsible for hundreds of probable E. coli cases. In 2003, a Chi-chi's in Pittsburgh was the site of, at the time, the largest hepatitis A outbreak in US history. Bad green onions infected 660 people and killed four. In 2010, a man got salmonella from an Old Country Buffet in Wyoming. The court ordered the chain to pay him \$11 million in damages.

"When you have enough stories in the news about people getting food poisoning from these places. That affects public perception, and people will go elsewhere. It's been downhill ever since."

Between 1998 and 2017, more than thirteen hundred all-you-can-eat restaurants in the US closed down. Then came the coronavirus pandemic.

"It is hard to imagine a more lethal blow to all-you-can-eat buffets than COVID. Everyone takes from the same trays and puts it on their plate. There's a bunch of silverware sitting out. It's all communal, in a sense. And I don't want to eat food that maybe other people have sneezed on. That's just gross."

Sizzler, one of the biggest buffet chains in the US, announced bankruptcy in September 2020. The following year, the parent company of Old Country Buffet did the same. The pandemic shook Shady Maple too.

"We had to close here for over five months. We reopened. Then we had to close again between Thanksgiving and Christmas."

They started doing takeout. But what really kept the company afloat, Sumer says, was the Shady Maple grocery store behind the buffet, which brought in thousands of customers every day. But since 2021, Shady Maple's buffet business has come back with roaring success.

"The last two years have been our best years ever, and we're continuing to thrive."

Shady Maple's reputation for making fresh food has kept people coming back.

"There is this notion that everything is fresh or homemade. That's a different kind of proposition than a Cicis or Golden Corral. "

Instead of using premade mixes, chef Bryan Nagley whips up the béchamel sauce for the mac and cheese from scratch, using milk and shredded cheddar. He also makes the stuffing, or filling, as the Pennsylvania Dutch call it, by hand, following the founder's original recipe. He mixes 10 pounds of butter with bread cubes.

"You can feel it, you know what I mean? You can feel it with your hands."

To keep food fresh, the staff monitors the buffet closely, and orders more when a tray is close to running out.

"So, this is our ordering system that we order the food here. Then it goes back to the fryer aisle and the cooks department."

"Kielbasa!"

The fryers get the ticket, this one for fried shrimp, and fill the order as quickly as possible. That ticket stays with the batch back through the order window. But while an order of fried shrimp might take chefs two minutes to fill, the fried chicken takes 30 minutes.

"He's putting a load of chicken in. His name is Tungson. And then after he puts it in, we have them programmed in. Eighteen minutes it takes for fried chicken."

“What’s your nickname, son?”

“Handsome Man.”

“Because he thinks he’s handsome. He calls me Boss Lady.”

Tungson dunks and breads every piece by hand. Each order has 60 pieces, so he’s always juggling multiple batches at once.

“Handsome chicken.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Cook John Plott cooks the veggie they chopped earlier.

“What did you just put in?”

“Cabbage.”

“It takes 20 minutes?”

“Yes, ma’am. Cabbage, and then when it comes out, we throw some of our brown-butter-and-cornflake mixture on top of it. Sumer, this one just froze again.”

“Most restaurants will have a shutdown, and we don’t. We keep going from the moment we open at 7 am till we close at 7:30, so the equipment sometimes gets tired, like everybody else does.”

Down the aisle, John jumps in to make potatoes.

“We mix our mashed potatoes for five minutes. If you do it under, they don’t turn out. If you do it over, they don’t turn out. There is a science to it.”

At the end of the aisle, chefs pull the briskets out of the smoker.

“So, on a Saturday, we’ll go through 42.”

“We have it down to a science where it’s a hickory smoke, cooked 12 to 14 hours.”

Here they’re grilling rows of pierogi and kielbasa sausages.

“Hi, it’s me again.”

If you're like me and want to stay for both breakfast and lunch, you just have to go back to the front and pay the thirteen dollar difference.

"It's not actually an advertised thing, so you only hear it by word of mouth. It's a fun little perk from being here."

"If you have the stomach for two meals in a row."

"Yes."

"Round two."

The only thing Sumer said I needed to eat is this brisket.

"How long have you been working here for?"

"Long time, and I've been always on this grill."

"There you go."

"Thank you so much."

"Some people say it's expensive, but it's actually really cheap, you know, when you think about it."

"Ay! Love it."

I need to get the fried chicken. That's what everybody told me was the best thing here.

"Handsome Man, he's the one that made that."

"Ok, got the goods."

"And I think that's the stuffing Mr Bryan made for us."

"Can I get a burger with cheese, please?"

"Oh my God, we haven't seen any of these foods yet."

"Oh, my lord."

"Oh my God. Okay." So the plan of getting a little bit of everything does not work when there is seven hundred of everything.

Finally, I got to dig in, starting with this bright-pink-pickle-eggs, a traditional Amish eat. Look at that! Hm. It's not as bad as some of the people I've watched on Youtube expressed. It's very vinegary, but I think it's just the color, man. Like, to see an egg that's literally as pink as flesh, it's a little jarring, and I don't know if I can get past that.

Ok, so the fried chicken. Look at that. Now, that? Crispy. God, that's good! Best thing I've eaten all day, bar none. Best thing. Wow! No wonder he knows he's handsome.

We're going to try this pulled pork. The barbecue pork and Cajun catfish were decent. The mac and cheese? That's actually really good.

The brisket! Seven people said this brisket was like the only thing to get here. All right? Not to say my expectations are like to the moon, but they're high. No. It's a little dry.

Good chicken wings. Good chicken wings, good fried chicken, good fried shrimp. Oh, the mashed potatoes! So, it's like a creamier version of what you would get out of a box, I think. I mean, for the amount of food that you can get, I feel like the quantity alone is kind of worth it.

"So, we tried the Chinese buffet, we tried Golden Corral, and we were comparing both of them, and we realized how bad the actual food is at both of them. And then when you come over here, though, this place is actually decent. It tastes more like real food. I'll definitely come back, yeah. This is my third time in, like, the past two months."

"We came one time, and that was it."

"Yeah, that was it."

"And now we look forward to coming every week."

"I love this place!"

By 5:30 pm, the line has wrapped around the lobby and out the door. Like all buffets, Shady Maple works on thin margins, but this volume has kept it afloat. It

sees three times more traffic than a Golden Corral in the area and fifteen times that of a local CiCis. And because of that giant line, each platter of food is turned over quickly, within twenty minutes.

“That does alleviate some of the food safety issues. Because you’re turning things over so quickly, nothing sits around for too long.”

But when we look at the decay of the American buffet, I feel like this doesn’t even sit in the same category. Shady Maple has found its niche. It’s not only the largest buffet in America, it’s also leaned into the allure of the Amish country around it, focusing on homestyle Pennsylvania Dutch food and touting local eats like that scrapple and mush.

“And I think the reason that this place has endured is, food aside, it’s the experience.”

With a gift shop and a grocery store looming behind the buffet, Shady Maple has become a destination.

“They become rare enough to be novel again, right? And people will go to Amish country and say, ‘Oh, let’s go to Shady Maple,’ because who the hell has one of them in their neighborhood anymore?”

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