

introduction

mm. On a personal note. I want to be full all the time. I want a third stomach to store the excess undigested buffet food so I don't feel sick, and once I get hungry again I'll transfer the extra food from my third stomach into my primary stomach. But alas, that is not a reality. Therefore, I guess I'll just have to face the facts.

Fact 1: I am not fiction.

Fact 2: I am not immortal.

Fact 3: I don't have as many stomachs as I would like.

Fact 4: There will always be more buffet.

The dangers of overeating are not a figment of my imagination. It's a harsh reality to accept, but if I don't come to terms with it, it will ruin buffet experiences to come. The bottomless pit most people know as my stomach does have an end; it happens to be where the small intestines begin. With the knowledge of that limitation I have found certain things valuable to know before going into a buffet. These things, the reactions to the limitation, were all made obvious during my college years. The lessons learned in the Little Building Dining Hall remain some of the most important of my life. A good education can open so many doors.

The Dining Hall of this particular college was set up in a standard buffet-style. The absolute massivity of food offered on a daily basis was enough to drive one mad.

Section 1: Breakfast (cereals, bagels, breads)

Section 2: Soup and Salad (two soups, large salad selection, fruit, chili and rice)

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Section 3: The Deli (cold cut sandwiches, burgers, fries, etc.)

Section 4: Entrees (three to six hot entrees served depending on the time)

Section 5: Pizza (a rotating rack of four different pizzas)

Section 6: Dessert (large ice-cream selection, soft serve, cookies and small cakes)

Subsection 1: Drinks (soft drinks, milks, teas and coffees)

Subsection 2: Make Your Own Waffles (only on Sundays)

I didn't know how to handle myself. I would be completely overwhelmed, wanting to try everything, even though all but the entrée section always remained the same. I didn't care. Every time I walked in, it was a new buffet experience. There was no way I wasn't going to take advantage of this for all it was worth.

And so it began — plate after plate after plate, running back and forth and eating in no particular order. Whichever line was shortest would be where I went. If the shortest line was the same on my second round, I'd have seconds. I wouldn't stop until I hit every section.

This led to many, many instances where I felt so full and so sick I was no longer enjoying myself. I remember one of them clearly. I could barely move; I was lying down across two seats, groaning, arms wrapped around my stomach. If the food remained in there, a hole would actually rip through my belly. I couldn't handle it anymore and I asked a friend how to upchuck. She told me the maneuver and I spent the next seven minutes in the men's room with my index finger prodding against the back of my throat. I never threw up. The next hour or so was spent in the same excruciating pain. I indulged too much and paid the price. Now the whole buffet experience was ruined. If the Dining Hall was a place to gorge myself on good things — an overabundance of food and good company — then I had failed miserably. Having eaten so much I could not function; the enjoyment of the food was gone and I was feeling too sick to laugh with my friends. I remember that time as a vague feeling-sick montage. I had to change my ways or the concept of buffets would be ruined for a boy like me.

Things changed. I never went in on a partially full stomach. I slowed down my rate of consumption; this was the best adjustment I made. I found that if I chewed my food, as my mom instructed, 32 times per bite, then I could fit more in me. If I took the meal slowly enough then some of the food would already be digesting in the intestines, leaving room in my stomach for more, more food than I was built to have in me at once. There is a natural limit on the amount of pleasure one can withstand, but there will always be more buffet. The option of this good, gluttonous life is there. A buffet offers that chance to indulge.

Surprisingly the most important change I made to my habits, the one that let me fully understand the foods offered and the way they would go together, was to eat them in the order they were meant to be consumed. Soups and salads before entrees, dessert afterwards — a simple thing that made a world of difference.

Then there were good memories. I remember Sundays spent in my pajamas and bathrobe in the Dining Hall having eaten a whole day's worth by two o'clock. Cereal and waffles, wait, sandwich, wait, burger, wait, salad and soup, wait, (by then the hot lunches were ready) hot lunch, wait, seconds on the hot lunch, wait, dessert and fruit and sometimes a baked good, wait, end it off with a cup of tea. This was in the company of friends

rotating in and out of the Dining Hall throughout the day. I was full; I had overeaten but not to the point of discomfort or sickness. I had finally found a communion with the art of eating buffet.

Little did I know how useful all those lessons would become. For now, on this clear night made still by empty streets and dim lamplights, we will explore what London has to offer. So, my friend, as we continue on our journey, keep in mind the suggestions I've put forth for though they are easy to think of in advance, they are easy to forget when in the throes of MORE.

~ Phred Chao

Don't you appreciate food?" people ask. "Don't you understand the art of it, the subtle beauty of enjoying small amounts of good food slowly?" Buffet eating is a lost art for precisely the above prejudice; the classic scene of overweight American families shoveling piles of food into their mouths without chewing, just to get to another plate before their stomachs realize what's happening, all for the purpose of getting their money's worth. But that is far from the entire picture. My appreciation of food is boundless, and my answer to that stereotype has always been, "Since when did good food have to come in small amounts?"

Once the art of the buffet is rediscovered it serves up uncountable pleasures to the average gastronome. And who wants to be anything but average when it comes to food? The more advanced one's tastes become, the more likely one is to forego real food for high priced culinary experiments that feature more plate and garnish than anything edible. The average gastronome is that person who never forgot how important meals were as a child — the heaping bowls of potatoes and salads and vegetables, baskets of bread, baking pans overflowing with anything from the simple pork chop or steak to the more elaborate lasagnas and roasted turkeys. In his or her travels, each meal is an attempt to recreate the sense of security that comes from abundance, the pleasures of the hearth recalled in each taste, and the comfort of having people next to you to share it all with.

A buffet is, in essence, an average meal, and it comes at a price that makes you feel like you're getting away with something. It's akin to diner culture, in that it's a place to unwind, chow, and laugh. That in itself is, of course, an American phenomenon, and is highly unusual to find in an ancient city now regarded as the capital of Europe. But another look finds it not so unusual, when considering the startling influx of American junk culture into modern English society. A McDonald's for every block of Oxford Street has been an inter-

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national joke for at least a decade now, but the proliferation of KFC and Burger King franchises throughout normally stoic English cities like Oxford and Bath is a little more unsettling. Old London Towne itself has filled its darker, older corners with as many soulless steak houses and Pizza Huts as there are pubs and antiquarian bookshops. The proliferation of buffets in London is assuredly due to the same reasons Mickey Ds infests the city like the rats used to — tourist appeal. But tourists and Londoners alike are ill-served by eating in a place like this because of its American familiarity or its convenience or its cheapness. Approached correctly, the buffet offers something very new: an opportunity to find the mid-point between abundant cheap crap and minimal overpriced crap, and to achieve, in the apparent absurdity, a higher level of experience.

There is a way to do things that involves a deeper appreciation of time; a conversation that serves only to map the psychic terrain of the speakers, or a trip that goes beyond simply seeing things to force open all the senses, and keep them open. The first time I ever spent a whole day in a buffet-style school cafeteria was one of the earliest moments of this realization. It's a moment everyone experiences at some point, when life reduces itself to a simple thing like food and then goes one step further to become the moment. It's powerful because you see that you can do this. You can eat as much as you want of whatever you want over as much time as you need, and the pure ridiculousness of that reveals the vast expanse of everything else you could do if you wanted, of just how many places and people and actions there are available to experience in the world.

So this is London, though it may not look or smell or taste like London. And this is a travelogue even though it definitely does not read like one. This is about food, but also all the things that naturally sweeten a life once a true appreciation of food is found. This is about the foundation stone of an evening. So if you read about a buffet on the Charing Cross Road, know that it is also about a walk through the throngs crowding Trafalgar and the Strand, a walk leading you out to Victoria Gardens to recline, watch the starless sky, eat a Magnum ice cream bar, and listen. Here, the buffet is simply a window. Outside the window is a city.

~ Jesse Post

All I want is a third stomach.