

IN LINE TO DINE

BY ERIC FRANCIS

FROM A YOUNG AGE, I have been a dedicated eater.

I come by it honestly. My father was a lover of food and, in his later years, was possessed of a noteworthy waistline—or, as my brother once poetically described it, “a well-developed dinner-table muscle.” When taking his family to dinner, whether on the town or out of town, he was a big fan of any sort of all-you-can-eat joint. See, Dad was a bit of a penny pincher; he always claimed it was his Scottish ancestry that made him so frugal. So an all-you-can-eat buffet was a fiscal dream come true for a man raising two gangly, hollow-legged boys.

If memory serves, my first encounter with the concept of endless helpings was at the old Shakey’s Pizza in Little Rock for its Tuesday-night buffet. Upon arrival, Dad would pay the cashier, collect our plates and, before handing them to his starving youngsters, give us the same, solemn admonition every time: “Now, boys, make sure you get my money’s worth.”

Mom would wisely counsel moderation, but when you’re 8 or 9 and someone is telling you, “Why yes, you may have a fifth slice of pepperoni,” who are you going to listen to? Of course to this day, Mom is slender, and I have my father’s profile. Let this be a lesson to all you young people out there: Listen to your mother.

For several years, Shakey’s Pizza was the only all-you-can-eat experience I knew. But later, while vacationing somewhere down along the Gulf Coast, we stopped in at a fancy-sounding joint called the Sweden House. Well, I thought it sounded fancy, but I was probably about 12, so I’m cutting myself some slack. Anyway, the Sweden House promised something downright exotic: A smörgåsbord! This word was new to me, and I had no idea what to expect. Was it a fish? A fowl? A dessert? Surely not a vegetable—it sounded far too interesting to be a vegetable.

Once inside, I discovered that it was all of the above: A smörgåsbord was just like Shakey’s, except with everything except pizza! This was a true revelation. As I piled on a little bit of this and a little bit of that (and seconds of dessert, you can bet), I remember thinking that this whole smörgåsbord idea might just catch on here in America, if only there were more Sweden Houses around.

As it happened, I was unaware that Americans had already embraced the concept and made it our own long before our late-1970s road trip. The endless buffet, the all-you-can-stuff special, the bottomless cup of coffee—they all spoke to the prevailing American attitude toward food, which I believe boils down to perceiving eating as a sport. It’s all about how much can you eat, and can I eat more than that? And of course, it speaks to a very Southern attitude, as well—that of hospitality. Of course you’re

going back for another helping; it would be rude not to! Here in Arkansas, I find a further distillation of these philosophies. In a state that has been largely rural and largely poor for most of its existence, inviting people to your table was an act of generosity. Even when there’s only just enough to go around, we still tend to turn to our guests and say, “Naw, you go ahead and have that last piece of chicken.”

While that sense of generosity still exists in homes and restaurants both, it does seem to me that the smörgåsbord has become a rarer creature in these later years. Whether that is a result of economic pressure or the pressing of our bellies against our belts, I can’t say, but it seems all-you-can-eat has become an occasional specialty. Casinos trumpet buffets as part of their siren song to the gambling set, of course, and hotels set them up during holidays for the folks who don’t want to cook for all the relations who are showing up. A few pizza chains offer such buffets, and you can hardly count the places that feature all-you-can-eat catfish one day a week.

More often than not, though, I find that if you’re standing in line to dine, you only get one trip through. That’s not such a bad thing, especially in the waistline department. And cafeterias, after all, are also fixtures of the South. Franke’s in the University Mall was another go-to dining destination for my family while I was growing up. The dining room, with its dark

wood paneling, was a comfortable place and, to my young eyes, seemed almost formal. That impression was backed up by the fact that nobody ever seemed to speak louder than a mutter at Franke’s—they were using, in other words, their dinner-table voices.

That’s something that still sticks with me about places like these—the smörgåsbords and buffet lines and cafeterias. Even though you’re in a big room full of strangers, it can still feel a lot like you’re eating at home. Maybe it’s because the food is, more often than not, the home-cooked variety. Maybe it’s because such places appeal to people of a certain generation, and the children of those folks, who held that table manners were paramount and that television and supper were mutually exclusive. Don’t get me wrong, I like a rowdy bar and grill and eateries where friends are laughing and shrieking and raising all kinds of ruckus. But every now and then, I find myself drawn to the kind of place where I grab a tray and stand patiently and quietly in line with other people to get my supper.

And I always come away feeling I got my money’s worth.

Columnist Eric Francis makes his dinner plans in North Little Rock.



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