

Dish Omaha – April 23rd, 2025

Jeff: Here she is, Diane Watson, KVNO's resident foodie. Another edition of Dish Omaha. Good morning, Diane.

Diane: Good morning, Jeff. What would be a food product you would package and sell, something you're known for?

Jeff: Oh, well, it would be gluten-free, low sugar, and it would have chocolate. But I don't know what it would be. How about for you?

Diane: I got somebody that can help you figure that out, we're going to talk about. Probably my cream puffs. I'm always requested to bring my profiteroles, so I think I'll have to bring some in for you soon. But if you wanted to sell this gluten-free, sugar-free concoction, you wouldn't be able to just make it in your house and put it in a grocery store. You'd need somebody to help you navigate all of the things that go with that, and the Kitchen Council is doing just that, helping local food entrepreneurs find their footing and launch careers and businesses.

Jeff: Food trucks and catering and all the things.

Diane: Oh, you name it. People who make sauces and sell them in Hy-Vee, that kind of thing. Their literal mission statement is, we help food startups start up, which is great. In 2024, there were almost 2,000 food and beverage startups with \$4.2 billion in funding nationwide, so this is a big business. But there are regulations, you've got to find space, you've got to have a commercial kitchen, distribution, leases, you know, it's not for the faint of heart. So, at the Hoff Family Arts and Cultural Center, also known as PACE, there's an organization that helps. And I know, Jeff, you have a lot of experience with this spot.

Jeff: Yeah, for many years I actually had a studio there. It's a wonderful... it's a jewel, a crown jewel in the area. It's wonderful.

Diane: I agree. And it has so many different artistic and community components to it, and one of them is the Kitchen Council. One thing I got super excited about is when I got to go in and see their commercial kitchen.

Jeff: It's incredible.

Diane: It's 3,000 square feet, so there's production space that members can come in and use, there's storage options for things that you're going to be working on. And I looked at all the equipment and some of it is just so amazing, I have to geek out a little. So, they're Vulcan ovens and ranges. They're huge. They're available for super precision, high heat, low heat. They have a tilt skillet. So, think about a skillet that can hold 10 to 40 gallons.

Jeff: A skillet?

Diane: Yes. And it tilts so you don't have to try to lift that thing up.

Jeff: I was wondering how...

Diane: Right. So, it's for frying, simmering, boiling, braising. They've got a 60-quart Hobart mixer.

Jeff: Those giant mixers.

Diane: Yes. So, think about the KitchenAid you'd have on your counter or that you'd see in the big ones I used to see in my lunchroom in high school. 60 quarts. And then they've got a steam-jacked kettle that can hold between 500 and 200 gallons. So what that is, is steam in between two walls. So, it's good for soups, sauces, when you're making that stuff in quantity. And then they've got a blast chiller, which can take something from 160 degrees to 38 degrees in 90 minutes.

Jeff: So, if you're a startup, you're just beginning, you don't have a big budget, you can't afford to go buy those things.

Diane: Correct. Or even know where to find them. They're at Kitchen Council. So, in addition to using the facility, there's educational resources, there's guidance, navigating health department regulations and licensing. And then they put you in touch with partner organizations and you get other business opportunities. They had an event not long ago where Chef David Burke from Top Chef Masters came, and they had an event, kind of like a Top Chef event.

Jeff: Oh, really? Oh, yeah.

Diane: Yeah, so some of the local chefs participated. There's also mentorship, which is so important when you're growing a business. And so, you can get a membership to access the kitchen with full-time time or just on nights and weekends with storage. And speaking of startups.

Jeff: Yes.

Diane: Happy birthday to Dish Omaha. Tomorrow is our one-year birthday that we started this venture together.

Jeff: Wow! Happy birthday to you.

Diane: And I want to just thank you for a great journey. We've got lots more food to talk about, but it's been a delight doing this with you, Jeff.

Jeff: It has truly been a delight, but I have one question for you.

Diane: Yes.

Jeff: Where's the cake?

Diane: It's being delivered later. (laughter)

Jeff: Maybe baked at Kitchen Council?

Diane: That'd be fun.

Jeff: Okay. Diane Watson, congratulations. Dish Omaha. Appreciate you. And we'll talk to you again next week.

Diane: See you next week.