

The Edge of the Universe— rooted at the height of the pandemic, in the center of the country, and the heart of its community

by Rachel McCulley

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OMAHA, Neb. - Have you ever tried to visualize the edge of the universe? Chances are, you didn't think it would be in Omaha, Neb., but that's precisely where you will find the [Edge of the Universe](#), a themed café in Omaha's Benson neighborhood that serves coffee, cocktails, and baked goods.

When co-owners Rachel Evans and Adam Van Osdel began renovating a new café in March 2020, they had no idea the challenges a global pandemic would soon bring.

"Yeah," Evans said, working behind the bar of the café, "so we started renovations on the building in March 2020, before COVID was a thing. And then everything shut down. We were supposed to open in June, and we couldn't open until October."

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed renovations on the café, putting the new business at a financial disadvantage. "I put everything into this," said Evans, "so when we opened, I had no money, no 401k; everything was gone."

[Downtown Benson](#) welcomed Edge of the Universe on Oct. 23, 2020. In November, the cafe faced its first challenge when the city reduced its occupancy rating to 25 percent. "We picked this location because there's great foot traffic, but no one was out," Evans said as she described the beginning months. "People didn't know us; they didn't know we existed. So, we just kept chugging along."

Just over one year later, Benson's main street bustles with activity. Evans smiled as she looked out the café's window, "Benson's the most art-filled area-- it's so inclusive, actively works for social justice, and makes everyone feel welcome and important." It's easy to see why Evans always knew, "It wasn't going to be anywhere else in Omaha."

Evans and Van Osdel wanted the café to have a European feel, with coffee, cocktails, and a little bit of everything. "I love change, and that's where the different themes come in. We wanted to feature local artists and change them quarterly, but that just hasn't happened with the pandemic. We've had two, but honestly, I feel so lucky to be open. It's amazing."

The café's first theme, "Happily Ever After," left people with visions of fairy tales, and word spread quickly. Evans described a "Disney Princess" movie night with nostalgia, "We had whimsical mugs covered in gold and rhinestones, and glowing ice cubes in the cocktails. I

wanted people to forget the real world for a while," she said. Evans and Van Osdel designed the "Happily Ever After" theme, transforming the entire café into an enchanting fairy tale with soft lighting that enhanced the tin ceiling, initially made in 1910.

The current theme, "Starry Starry Night," creates a magical aura as it envelops guests in the night-filled sky from every angle. Visitors enter the café through a cozy arbor made of twisted branches, flowers, and lights and emerge to see walls covered in a rendition of Van Gogh's famous work, ["Starry Night."](#) Twinkling lights drape down from the ceiling, and sunflowers fill empty niches with light.

"I don't know where to look first," 10-year-old Jaxen Kocsis said when he walked inside Edge of the Universe for the first time, "Van Gogh, it's everywhere!"

Kocsis and his mom visited the café to play true crime trivia and discovered so much more. "I think the best part is the tree tunnel," he said, looking up at the arbor. "I take that back; it's definitely the hot chocolate," he said.

The drink menu claims the hot chocolate is "truly the best around and can come in assorted flavors." Edge of the Universe offers a variety of food and drinks guaranteed to please any palette on its [Starry Starry Night menu](#). Beverages include gourmet coffees and hot chocolates, cocktails that reflect the current theme, and boozy malt shakes. Charcuterie boards for appetites big and small come in three varied sizes: regular, large, and the beast board. Don't forget dessert. If it's a sweet treat you're craving, there's always a new baked good, with gluten-free and vegan options. Need a recommendation? "My vote is for the mint macaroon," Kocsis said.

People showed their love for the menu in January 2021, when tens of thousands of nominations from Omaha community members started coming in for the annual [Readers' Choice Awards](#). According to Reed Moore of The Reader, community members chose Edge of the Universe for two Reader's Choice awards in 2021, including Best of the Big O's-- Best Bar for Conversation and Best Café/Diner.

"It was well deserved," said Jessica Graziano, a regular cafe patron. "Benson is a hip place. Benson is eclectic, and Edge of the Universe is eclectic. The cafe fits well in Benson and adds to the character."

What makes Edge of the Universe unique is that people of all ages are welcome no matter the time of day or type of event. Evans told Kim Reiner of [Omaha Magazine](#) that the focus of the business was on being a café rather than a bar. Evans and Osdel wanted a company where children were welcome and knew that wouldn't be possible with a bar. This inclusive café attracts families and bar hoppers with its colorful menu ranging from macaroons to martinis and a fun, relaxed vibe.

Another reason guests visit is to participate in weekly events like trivia, bingo, and movie nights, which guarantee an evening of entertainment. On trivia nights, each table forms a team that must develop a creative name. The group plays five rounds of trivia, and the topics rotate every other week. "The week we did Disney princesses, we turned away probably four groups because we were just absolutely booked in here. I literally had an entire group standing because they just wanted to be part of it," Evans laughed.

Trivia is what drew Graziano to the café for the first time. "A friend invited me one night," she remarked. After seeing an Instagram post for [Kittens and Cocktails](#) trivia, Graziano mentioned her reaction, "I knew I wanted to come back."

Edge of the Universe recently hosted an evening with the local cat rescue, [Feline Friendz](#). "We did a nonprofit event with a cat foster group, and they actually brought in little kittens," Evans remarked, "It was the cutest thing ever. They did their own trivia and raised money for their foster program."

Co-owners Evans and Van Osdel have backgrounds in nonprofit work. Van Osdel is the creative director at the [Hoff Family Arts and Culture Center](#) in Council Bluffs, Iowa, a nonprofit organization in a neighboring town.

According to Evans, "There's over 900 nonprofits in Omaha, and anytime one comes in asking to do a special night for this or that, we love it. There's just so much community that we can give back to."

[Girls Inc.](#) is another local nonprofit that partners with Edge of the Universe. Girls Inc. collaborates with girls ages 5 to 18 to help provide essential health, hygiene, educational supplies, and other programs to help empower young women.

"We had our intern Tiana this summer," said Evans, "and she was my favorite human being. She came in every day in the afternoons and learned how to make cappuccino, lattes, and espresso, and she was amazing because the second she got it, she was just chomping at the bit to get it done."

The café gives the girls firsthand experience and professional development training during their internships. "I'd have her sit in on interviews with me," Evans said, "and even have her ask questions. When she's 16 and can get a job, she should be able to walk right on in."

The café's outreach isn't limited to nonprofit organizations. In February 2021, when the bitter cold temperatures dropped to the single digits, Emily Dwire of Omaha's [WOWT News](#) reported

that the café put a sign outside that said, "It's too cold. All are welcome to warm up here. Come on in." According to Dwire, the café's owner Rachel Evans said that anyone could come to the café to warm up, even if they didn't have money to buy anything.

Evans told WOWT News, "We value human life. The name Edge of the Universe is because we have a theory that we'd all be equal together if everyone sat at the edge of the universe." According to Evans, "Everyone who comes in this door should feel welcome, glad that they're here, and feel the warmth inside and out."

Each person who walks in the door receives a greeting that says this is where they're supposed to be. Evans said the café's employees have the same mindset. "They're an amazing staff," she reflected. Evans knows how lucky she is to work with people she can trust and credits them with the café's success.

Everyone who works at Edge of the Universe believes in its magic. "Starting your own business is stupid crazy," Evans laughed, "and we're lucky to be standing. So, we go from here."

What's in store for this themed café? Be on the lookout for a Hawaiian theme with a disco twist. Evans' face lit up with delight as she exclaimed, "Our next one is going to be awesome!"

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