

Dining in Warsaw

— Hints for ETAPS 2003 Participants —

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Foreword

About the only complaint on ETAPS'02 in Grenoble I heard concerned the fact that no list of restaurants was readily available. Since this was considered a defect in France, I realised immediately that this might be even more of a problem in Poland. So, one of the first resolutions of the ETAPS'03 team was that a list of Warsaw restaurants must be made available for participants. Indeed, you will find more than one such list among the tourist material provided. I looked at them though and realised that they all are so dry: I wouldn't be able to make up my mind where to go for dinner on this basis. Hence, additionally stimulated by an old, classical paper by Fernando Orejas written I believe for ICALP'83 in Barcelona (once ETAPS'03 is over, you should really look forward to ETAPS'04!), I decided to try to write down at least a few random hints to help.

I must admit that I have no good idea how to start, or how to organise whatever I might be able to suggest. I guess I will try to first hint on typical Polish dishes you might encounter in a restaurant menu. Here, the order is pretty obvious: starters, soups, main course, desserts... Then I will try to list some Warsaw restaurants that might be worth thinking about. Basically, the list will be arranged by moving from one area to another, with an occasional insert on some specific motif.

Disclaimer: No, I am not an expert, and I make no attempt to supply any objective and comprehensive review of the whole Warsaw restaurant scene. I must also apologise for the roughness and inadequacy of my English: food and restaurants are not the typical topics of my writings, sorry! No binding promises are made either: the hints here may have little in common with the current state of the matters in various places in Warsaw. I just write down what my personal impressions were of a few places I know, I want to know, or at least I heard or read¹ about. The rest is up to you: you have to choose, judge and explore on your own. I hope my hints turn out helpful; but please don't blame me if they turn out wrong.

1 Eating in Warsaw

What a mixture! What a variety! Is it? Well, if one compares Warsaw with quite a few other European capitals — perhaps not. Do realise though that not much more than a decade ago there were just a handful of places in Warsaw where I would not hesitate to take a foreign visitor for dinner. And this was a shame, since the Polish cuisine has really quite a lot to offer.

1.1 Polish food

Starters

How to begin? Okay, a drink will never be a miss, especially in Poland. And then there is quite a choice of good starters to choose from. First, very traditional: some fish. *Śledź* (herring) is a good option, whether marinated, or in oil, or perhaps covered with horse-radish or apple and sour cream sauce — a very befitting accompaniment for a glass of vodka. Try also, if you have a chance, smoked eel (*węgorz*). Or smoked trout (*pstrąg*), my personal favourite. More in a Polish-Jewish cuisine tradition, but not less tasty, are *gefilte fish* (*ryba faszerowana*), or sweet, sweet carp in jelly Jewish style (*karp po żydowsku*, *karp w galarecie*).

Another possibility is to start with a plate of sausages, hams, patés — when done in a true home-made style, these get as good as nowhere else. Steak tartar is another favourite on the meaty side.

¹I hasten to acknowledge the influence of a weekly column *Warszawa pełną gębą* by **Maciej Nowak** in *Gazeta Wyborcza* — *Co Jest Grane*, as well as of the *Eating Out* section of the *Warsaw Insider*.

If you're vegetarian: well, Poles are very much meat-eaters, so do not expect marvels. For a starter, perhaps try traditional, hard-boiled eggs, covered with mayonnaise, or sometimes in an oven version, stuffed with vegetables. *Salatka warzywna* is another option: various boiled vegetables plus hard-boiled eggs and (necessarily!) sour cucumber, all cut into small pieces and mixed with a bit of mayonnaise — whatever you get under this name in a restaurant, believe me, nobody makes it as good as my father.

On a more serious list here are *pierogi*: a typical Polish dumplings in their dozens of varieties with diverse stuffing. First, of course, there are the most standard pierogi stuffed with meat (veal is perhaps the best, but don't be overly strict: mixed pork and beef can be equally tasty). Then there are vegetarian varieties: those stuffed with mushrooms and cabbage (the more mushrooms, the better for me) or *pierogi ruskie* (Russian) stuffed with cottage cheese and potatoes. Last but not least: sweeter varieties, filled up with cottage cheese or with various fruit. If you can (sorry, unlikely, the season does not come before July) get them with blueberries or sweet plums!

Although I list them among starters, pierogi can also come as a main course, or even as a desert. Another speciality with a similar wide range of possibilities are pancakes (*naleśniki*): they would be a bit thicker than French crêpes, and again, can be wonderfully wrapped around cottage cheese, jam, fruit, whatever — do not forget to cover them with cream.

Soups

Soups provide a serious alternative to starters in Poland, or perhaps a follow-up for more serious eaters. Beware though: they can get quite heavy and filling. Let us start with something light though: *barszczyk*, more a drink than a soup of red beetroots with spices, often served in a cup in a company of a small pastry stuffed with meat, or in a bowl with a few small dumplings floating in it. Do not confuse it with a serious *barszcz*, a more sour beetroot soup, at its best when full of beans, potatoes, carrots, and some meat (well, at least this is the way I like it). Nothing gets much more sour than a good Polish *żur*: a sour rye soup, creamy in colour, served really hot with a piece of sausage and usually a half of a hard-boiled egg in it. *Krupnik* is another of the heavy soups, filled with barley and potato, solidly based on a good meat broth. Polish tripe soup, *flaki*, can be a meal on its own, accompanied by a good piece of bread and a solid portion of beer. Excellent! A favourite for the summer is *chłodnik* — a cold soup based on beetroots, perhaps cucumbers and sour milk; pity it's not the right season.

Main courses

Poles are meat-eaters. So, nothing in this section on salads — these just come as a small side dish in a proper Polish meal, although some of them are worth mention. Take *mizeria*: fresh cucumber in sour cream sauce; or *buraczki* (beetroots): either in a salad-like form, with pieces of onion and apple, or boiled and grained, or as *ćwikła*, mixed with horse-radish. By the way, *chrzan* (horse-radish) is a perfect addition to any kind of meat in Poland, in this rôle matched perhaps only by *borówki* or *żurawina* (cranberries). *Grzyby* (mushrooms — I mean: true forest mushrooms, like chanterelles, *kurki*, or ceps, *prawdziwki*) is certainly one of the Polish specialities. When plentiful, may accompany the main course simply fried or simmered, with a bit of sour cream, or just plain, perhaps with a taste of onion — and can easily stand as a main course on their own. But they also come hidden in a variety of sauces. Or as pickles. Gosh, how could I forget above: yes, *grzybowa*, the mushroom soup!

Among meat: pork is predominant. In a way, meat is prepared as everywhere else. Served with some staples, typically potatoes (most often: just boiled) — but if I have a choice, I go for any *kasza* instead, with buckwheat (*kasza gryczana*) being the best. Various dumplings may also successfully replace *kasza*: consider *kopytka*, small potato dumplings (a bit like gnocchi, but quite different). They must not be confused with *placki ziemniaczane* (potato pancakes) best when fried thin and crispy, delicious with some sour cream and/or a bit of sugar. There are also *pyzy*, another potato speciality, larger (or even quite large) dumplings stuffed with meat, which can come as a starter or a main course on their own.

Perhaps the most standard thing to have in Poland is *kotlet schabowy*, a pork chop, fried a bit like a Wiener-schnitzel. Then we have a variety of roasted pork meats, typically covered with some heavy sauce. Don't be surprised if you turn Bavarian here: *golonka* (pork knuckle) is about as popular here as *schweine-haxen* in Munich, and I dare say, at least as good and prepared in at least as many ways as there. *Zrazy* bring us to beef: they come as simple slices of meet, fried and then simmered in a heavy sauce, but are at their best when prepared rolled around some stuffing (onion, sour cucumber, some other pickle). Yes, you can also get some lamb, but for this I would rather go to the south of Poland. What may be the best in Poland is game. In quite a few Warsaw restaurants, you can safely go for a good piece of wild boar or deer. Try also rabbit (or rather: hare — I mean the wild animal, not its tamed cousin). Poultry can be excellent: duck (*kaczka*) is at its best when served with sweet and sour apples — but goose (*gęś*) can be even better, though much more difficult to come by. Back to the wild: try pheasant (*bażant*) or quail (*przepiórka*) if you have a chance.

Fish, especially sweet-water fish is something you should not miss in Poland. *Pstrąg* (trout) is standard, but try *sandacz* (zander), *sielawa* (???) or *lin* (tench) if you have a chance. When fresh, then simply grilled or saute

are excellent. But *lin w śmietanie* (tench in sour cream) may be just marvellous as well. Pity that the best fish place is about one hour drive away from the centre. . .

To finish the section up, something slightly unusual, and typically Polish: *goląbki* — cabbage leaves stuffed with meat and rice, sometimes with a touch of mushroom, sometimes with some other grain replacing rice, always in sauce, typically tomato-based. And another one: *bigos*, a cabbage dish which in essences consists of mixed sour and sweet cabbage, cooked with everything meaty you can find in your fridge and propped up (necessarily!) with prunes and mushrooms (there also exists its vegetarian version, if someone insists).

Cheese

I should finish this section before I start writing it. . .

Okay: when you hear *ser* (cheese) in Poland, think of a standard, hard, plain, yellow Gouda, rather than Camembert, Münster or Epoisse. Of course, Gouda can be good on your sandwich — but think twice before going for it to round your dinner up.

On the other hand, white Polish cottage cheese (*biały ser*, or *twaróg*) is nowhere as good as here — perfect for breakfast. It may come sweet, as *twarożek* mixed with cream, or *biały ser*, more solid, ideal on a slice of fresh bread with home-made sweet preserves or honey. There is also a more salty way of serving it, with chives and onion, perhaps further propped up by a touch of garlic. Back to dinner time, before I forget: for desert, or for a starter, you can also ask for *leniwe*, dumplings made with *twaróg* (hence mentioned in this section) — a bit on a sweet side, delicious with cream and/or sugar. Perfect also for light lunch!

Deserts

Cakes, cakes and cakes again. Have them during the day, have them before the meal, have them with your coffee after the meal — because they are worth it in Poland. *Sernik* — cheesecake. I know, you will not get it as good as at my parents-in-law, but still. . . If my German friends think that apfel-strudel is the mark of their nationality, they should try some good *szarlotka* here. Poppy-seed (*mak*) cakes come in a dozen of wonderful varieties, each better than the others, with *makowiec* being perhaps the most typical. And Polish *pączki* (not to be confused with what you can get as doughnuts in some countries) are always worth a sin, even during Lent. Incidentally, you may want to try, or even to take home a piece of *mazurek*, a typical Polish Easter cake — I believe they should be already available a week before Easter.

1.2 Drinks

You must realise, you're away from Mediterranean. There is not much wine produced in this country. Instead, Poles have vodka, and make good use of it. To begin with, there is a wide choice of pure, clear vodkas. To enjoy it properly, have it served well-chilled, and drink a whole (small, if you wish, but this is not obligatory) glass in one gulp. Then ask for another. Or switch to any of the flavoured varieties. Among those, perhaps *Żubrówka* (bison-grass flavoured) is best known. But do not miss *Pieprzówka* (pepper vodka), or special herb sweet-bitter vodka (like *Żołądkowa*) — exclusively for medical purposes, of course. Don't shy away from the sweetness of *Wiśniówka* (wild cherry vodka), *Ajerkoniak* (*Advocat*, egg-liqueur), or perhaps the best of all, honey vodka (like *Krupnik* or *Miodówka*). For an alternative to classical vodka, try *śliwowica* (plum vodka). Against all rules, I serve it well frozen recently, and it goes in excellently then, especially in its stronger variations (yes, it can go up to 70% by volume, and higher). If you need a brandy to finish up a meal, try *Starka* or some *winiak* — may be quite good, though rather sharp by French cognac standards.

A hint though: do not try to outdrink or even mimic the locals, unless you really know what you're doing. . .

So, you will need something weaker to go on through the meal. Beer is quite good in Poland these days. Always very popular, over the last decade a serious investment into the industry brought it up to quite a decent standard, so that whatever you order should not be very bad. And may be quite good. As a rule, avoid boring standard international brands (after all, you can get *Heineken* everywhere, can't you?). As the only exception, try some Czech beer, for instance true *Budweiser* (infinitely better than its American relative) or truly excellent *Pilsner Urquell*. Among Polish trade marks are *Żywiec* (yes, *Żywiec*, the town, is close to the Czech border), followed by a number of other brands popular all over Poland (like *Okocim*, *Lech*, etc). When in a restaurant, ask what they serve draught — and this is often the best bet. In a pub, you will still have to choose. My preference is always for “smaller”, local breweries. I like, for instance, *Heweliusz* and *Kaper* from Gdańsk, available also here. A typical Polish beer is a lager. But try stronger (*mocne*), darker varieties as well — they always seem more tasty to me. A dark and serious porter can be very good: apparently, a few pubs in Warsaw serve draught *Żywiec* porter: if you hit one of them, go for it and do not leave too early.

Back to wine: yes, it is getting more and more popular here. It has been a while since the most serious Polish wine experts distinguished two varieties: white and red, the former for fish, and the latter for meat (both at least

semi-sweet, of course). Seriously now: the wine culture is growing, the choice is getting better and better — but the prices are high. I am not surprised anymore when I hit here a bottle of the same wine which I saw earlier in Paris at half of the price. And things get worse in restaurants: for some reason, typical restaurant prices are often even higher, out of reasonable proportion. Fortunately, there are more and more exceptions. You will certainly find some decent (or even very good, if you're prepared to pay) wines from all over Europe and all over the world. You may be tempted to try some Bulgarian or Hungarian wines here: by all means, do so — but avoid the cheaper wines among them, they are notoriously unreliable.

Aha, before I forget: there are some quite good mineral waters in Poland, so you do not have to ask for Evian or Perrier. Try *Staropolanka* or *Muszynianka*, or other natural mineral waters from the south of Poland. And Polish fruit juices are excellent: try wild cherry or blackcurrant for something at least a bit less standard than apple or orange juice.

1.3 Some restaurant customs

Poles used to dine early — but the custom is changing, and nobody is surprised if you go for your dinner at 9pm or even later. I would expect restaurants to get fuller around 8pm though. And most places will stay open as long as you're willing to order (and pay).

As everywhere, booking in advance is recommended — though not strictly necessary — at better places. No need to do this too much in advance, typically phoning in the afternoon will get you a table for the evening. You may want to ask for a table in a non-smoking section, but even if understood and confirmed, this will guarantee very little. Fortunately, there are fewer and fewer smokers around, so things are not too bad in restaurants either.

To pay: ask for *rachunek*. You may ask (but this is not customary) to get the bills calculated individually for each person. Add a tip: no strict rules on this, I usually round the price up, but basically never more than by 10% — this can be very little as well, if they come up with a bill that adds up to 199 zł, it's their bad luck (okay: I would leave 210 zł for a 199 bill, but 200 for 195, unless there is a special reason to add up). You can pay with your cards as everywhere.

One thing that often annoys me in Warsaw restaurants is that one is expected to pay separately for a cloakroom (and in some places even for the use of a toilet) — the tax varies between 1 and 5 zł per person.

Prices

I've just checked a 1991 edition of some guide book for Poland; let me quote:

~~You can eat and drink well for \$2 or less even at some of the country's best restaurants²~~

Yes, I have crossed this out deliberately: those times are gone! In the meantime, restaurant prices rocketed up to the usual European level in Warsaw (things are better everywhere else in Poland: for instance, Cracow restaurants offer a similar value for not much more than half of the Warsaw prices). Expect to pay some 80 zł for a modest meal in an okay restaurant. Count up to 50% more if you want a drink with more than just a one-course meal. 120 zł or so is a starting price level for a full dinner in a nice place, provided you are careful with your orders. And in the really best places, the sky is the limit...

2 A tour of Warsaw restaurants

One hears more and more about *clubbing*: going to as many clubs during one evening as possible. This is certainly not my game. Touring restaurants is another matter, except that in real life it is difficult to visit more than just a few of them per year. So, let me try to make a virtual tour — this should be faster.

I will try to exclude places which are unlikely to be of interest for practical reasons: too far out, or difficult to find. This applies in particular to most places on the other side of *Wisła* (which is a pity, as there are more and more good restaurants there). I will also omit all hotel restaurants. Some of them are very good, with the top hotels hosting a few top restaurants indeed, I believe — but somehow I just do not have the feeling of going-out fun in such places.

²Another nice story to make the same point: years ago, a foreign friend of mine invited a good dozen of visitors to a very decent Warsaw restaurant. After a superb meal, he made sure that paying in dollars was okay, and gave a 100 dollar note to the waiter. Then came a first surprise: he got some change. Strange look at the waiter was totally misread by the latter: everyone around could hear the sigh of disappointment, and additional notes started piling up in front of my friend.

2.1 Starting at *Foksal*

For ETAPS'03 participants, perhaps the most natural point to start will be the building of the Academy of Music at *Okólnik*, the venue for ETAPS'03 main conferences. This is just as well: walking for a minute or so from there, heading south, you have to hit *Foksal*, one of a few streets in Warsaw where there are more restaurants and cafes than houses — a slight exaggeration perhaps, but one can easily count a dozen of such places there. I'll mention just a few, starting from the far end (East).

In a nice villa there, you find *Foksal* (or is it *Villa Foksal*?). I am not sure if they label their cuisine as French or Italian, but for me this is a typical example of a line of relatively new Warsaw places with a pretence to a high class, largely visible via a very nice setting, elegant decor, competent service, dressing code (I would not go there in my jeans and pullover) and high prices, of course. The food is international: some Italian dishes (not a bad risotto with mushrooms in *Foksal*), some French, some up-graded Polish dishes — all reliably standard and quite eatable, but with nothing really I would remember for months.

Moving toward *Nowy Świat* from there, on the right you find *Tsubame* — one of the first Japanese places in Warsaw, and apparently still one of the best. Sushi bar downstairs. Quite enjoyable lunch sets close to the conference venue, if you want to spend a bit more on your lunch.

Japanese: The number of Japanese places in Warsaw is constantly growing: a visible sign is that there is a sushi bar at the end of the world near my flat at *Kabaty*. This is but an example: you can find sushi in quite a few places around the centre — but if I was to choose, I would rather go to one of the three Japanese places that have been here longest. *Tsubame* is one. The other is *Shogun* — quite a bit further out of the centre, but you can reach it by our only metro line quite easily. Very good sushi there, of course, but they specialise in Japanese grill — sorry, I do not recall the proper name. Anyway, you get to grill excellent small pieces of meat on a grill built into the table. I wonder if this is still as good as when I enjoyed it some years ago. Finally, the third place is *Tokio* — I think still composed of two not-quite-separate parts devoted to Japanese and Chinese food, respectively. Let me just say that it was full of Japanese locals when I went there a while ago.

Another few meters, the other side of the street, and another part of the world: *Chianti* (I do not need to identify the cuisine, do I?). Charming, pleasant, warm; quiet music in the background, candles at the tables. Perhaps the best pasta in town. And quite drinkable and affordable house wine.

Italian: I like *Chianti* very much, but it is not my favourite Italian place in Warsaw: this title goes definitely to *Roma*. Further south from the centre, a really small place, with crowded tables and absolutely nice homely atmosphere. Excellent pasta, imaginative main courses (I take chef's special there, mainly for the fantastic, honey-based sauce used to sprinkle over... — sorry, they do not spell this out in their menu, so I better keep the secret as well), accompanied by decent wine at decent prices. I also enjoyed *Bacio*, not far from *Marszałkowska*; consider also the newest and perhaps somehow most refined addition to the *Bacio* family, *Bacio di Angelo*. *Compagna del Sole* with their selection of freshly made pasta and a rich salad bar is another favourite, more as a very enjoyable lunch place than a hint for the dinner though.

There are probably a few more of a similar quality which I am yet to get to know — but no exhaustive search through Italian places is possible anymore, they keep mushrooming everywhere in Warsaw. Watch out though: "Italian restaurants" in Warsaw include pretty ghostly, microwave pizza places (as well as pizzerias with proper pizza ovens, which can nearly stand competition with their Italian archetypes) and restaurants with overcooked pasta (as well as the top few as those mentioned above).

Just a few meters further, you might stop by *Soma*. Local beer, from their local mini-brew, good crowd, and pretty international food, as befitting their usual clientele — apparently the place is full of "expats", foreigners living and working in Warsaw, relaxing in a nice place, in their loose informal garments, after their long, stressful and well-paid working hours. Care to join them?

If not, go to the other side of the street: at the corner of *Foksal* and *Galczyńskiego* there are two joyful places (or perhaps one place split into two) *Tam-Tam* and *Mañana*. The former perhaps somewhat louder and better known, the latter is more of a restaurant — if a good drink and a salad is what you're after, got to *Tam-Tam*; if you want a more sit-in dinner, go to *Mañana*. This is more a feeling than a rule though, since they seem to share the menu, which under a list of funny names (I do not know if they have an English version) hides quite interesting, even though sometimes non-orthodox food. Portions are sizable — and drinks are excellent (you can get professionally mixed *caipirinha* there, to remind some of you about AMAST'98/99). But make sure that you're not in a hurry — the name of the latter place characterises the service quite well.

In this way, we have reached *Nowy Świat* — once known as the street of top shops and top brands in Warsaw. I am not sure if this is still the case, with numerous classy shops opening in Warsaw new shopping malls — but on a lovely Spring day, the crowds will be there. There are quite a few coffee and food places: smaller and larger,

the oldest and the newest, snack bars and restaurants. One name must be mentioned: *Blikle Café*. In fact, when going out for a dinner in this area, I rarely take coffee or desert — instead I come here for their truly good coffee, and the most traditional cakes. You can also have some light but elegant food here (apparently, breakfasts in various styles are excellent!) — but overall this is a place that carries well over a hundred years of tradition of the best cakes in Warsaw. Blikle's *paczki* are undeniably the best in the world!

Once here, there are two directions to follow along the *Royal Tract* — yes, you guessed right: either north or south. North means toward the *Old Town* — we'll go there later, so now let's move south, toward *Łazienki* and then, far out, *Wilanów*.

Just a few steps away, before we cross *Aleje Jerozolimskie*, it is worth discovering *Restauracja Polska* hidden in a courtyard. Don't be scared by a rather disgusting entrance — go down and you will find one of the better places serving excellent Polish food. Their *pierogi* are among the bests, but they have alternatives as well: at the hot starter stage, try perhaps their *nereczki* (kidneys); at the main course side, why not a duck? Or just come to our First Workshop Dinner (on Sunday, April 6).

You can go out to *Aleje Jerozolimskie* by another access way to *Restauracja Polska*, and continue south along *Nowy Świat*.

2.2 Around *Plac Trzech Krzyży*

Once you cross *Aleje Jerozolimskie*, you are in the area of *Plac Trzech Krzyży*. On the way there, pass by *Montmartre* — I leave it up to you to guess the cuisine the place subscribes to. As expected, their menu covers all the frog legs and oysters you may want, but the portions are way too hooked to the *cuisine nouveau* scale to be of much interest to me.

Reaching *Plac Trzech Krzyży*, directly to the right, there is a line of cafes. Perhaps the best among them, known for erratic (to use a relatively nice adjective) service and a happy atmosphere of a good crowd of interesting people, are *Szpilka*, *Szpułka*, and *Szparka* (yes, they are related to each other not only by the similarity of names). More like cafes than restaurants indeed, lovely places for drinks, can well do as well if you're after a light meal (check some salads, or perhaps a vegetarian fondue?).

Entering *Aleje Ujazdowskie* behind *Plac Trzech Krzyży*, just to the right, you find *Cafe Ejlat*, one of the few Jewish restaurants in town.

Jewish: As far as I know, there is no certified kosher restaurant in Warsaw. I was explained in *Menora* that this is simply too expensive. But if necessary, they can use disposable dishes and put a fish thoroughly wrapped in some foil into their oven. There is a small shop next to the Warsaw synagogue where assuredly kosher stuff is available.

Kosher or not, the Jewish food at *Cafe Ejlat* and *Menora* may be quite good. Another place to try your *gefilte fish* is *Pod Samsonem*, although it goes more toward Polish-Jewish than strictly Jewish menu.

Sorry, we need backtrack to *Plac Trzech Krzyży* and instead of heading straight into *Aleje Ujazdowskie*, go slightly to the right, and enter *Mokotowska*. The first place to pay attention to here is just a few steps away from *Plac Trzech Krzyży*. *Adler* serves Bavarian/Polish cuisine at its best. This is the place for *golonka* and other solid, heavy meat dishes served in quite sizable portions. Oh yes, and this is the place for beer.

It takes a bit more walking along *Mokotowska* (*Bacio di Angelo* is nearly on the way) to cross *Piękna*, disregard overly expensive *Casa Valdemar*, and start paying attention to what appears at your right. First: *Stodki... Stony*, which opened a few years ago as a high-class coffee place. It still serves absolutely fantastic cakes, but you can also have an elegant salad or even a full dinner here: all just as high-class as the cakes they started with.

A bit further down *Mokotowska* we have *Dyspensa*: somewhat stylised, rustic decor makes a very good setting for the delicious food served here. A good mixture of the best of the Polish tradition, with some Italian and French hints, propped up very much by the home-made style of cooking. Simple, friendly atmosphere. One of my favourite places for going out for dinner in Warsaw.

2.3 Further south

One way or another, let me suggest going back to *Aleje Ujazdowskie* to continue moving south — perhaps even jumping on a bus, to go down by the *Łazienki* park, *Belweder*, Russian embassy, and stop at the crossroad of *Belwederska* and *Spacerowa*, near one of the newest of Warsaw posh hotels. We are not far from (not so posh) *Profesorski* hotel, surrounded by a few very tempting places.

Back to the left, hidden in the park, with access from *Parkowa*, there is *Belvedere* — one of the best restaurants in Warsaw. Located in the old building of *Łazienki Park Orangery*. You can enjoy top quality food looking at the green around you even at this time of the year. The pleasure can be costly though.

To the right, along *Spacerowa*, you can see a ghostly neon light of *Blue Cactus*.

Mexican: *Blue Cactus* is perhaps the most lively and most enjoyable of a couple of Mexican places in Warsaw.

Drinks are colourful and competently mixed, the place is loud and feels like fun — so who cares about food, as long as it comes in acceptable quality and quantity (as it does here). An alternative is *El Popo*, a bit more serious and food (rather than fun) oriented. *Amigos* feels rather like a regular American steak house than a tortilla place — you can try either here, with quite satisfying results.

Down *Belwederska*, nearly opposite each other, there are two hits, not only of this area. To the left, *Restauracja Polska Tradycja*, sharing the style, staff and the excellence of the menu with *Restauracja Polska*, but still more classy, I would say. Located in a totally redecorated villa surrounded by a small garden, where you can take your dinner or at least a drink (if only the season was right — sorry, not in April). Nice rooms, excellent feel of relaxed quality. Enjoy either on your own, or at the Second Workshop Dinner (Saturday, April 12). To the right: *Roma* (see above).

2.4 Along *Marszałkowska*

Continuing south along *Royal Track* for quite a while, one would reach *Wilanów*, where apart from the palace and its gardens, you can find a few restaurants as well; some people say that *Villa Nuova* is the very best restaurant in Warsaw — especially if you do not have to watch your wallet. From what I hear, no reason to quarrel with this, so I will not, especially that I have not had a chance to experience its quality as yet.

This may be a bit too far away though, so let's turn right just behind *Roma*, and walk uphill through a small park. Few people realise that it takes only a few minutes to hit *Morskie Oko*, a small street off *Puławska*. Not quite by pure chance, we thus have managed so to come by *Flik*, one of these reliable places to go for a very good dinner with no fear that something unexpected may spoil the evening.

From there, jump on a tram to go back toward the centre, passing a few lights that try to draw your attention to some of the eateries along *Puławska* and then *Marszałkowska*. *Plac Zbawiciela* is perhaps the place to get off.

No excuse, from here we have to go back for a few minutes to reach *Trasa Łazienkowska*, over which, a bit away from *Marszałkowska*, you find *Tandoor Palace*, advertised as “the best Indian restaurant in Poland”.

Indian: I am not sure about Poland, but *Tandoor Palace* is consistently the very best Indian place in Warsaw.

Great curries, excellent Balti dishes, good staff who knows what and how to advice, and a friendly boss making sure that everything is to your best satisfaction. The only potential competitor, *India Curry*, gained a lot on quality since they moved out of *Galeria Mokotów*, one of the huge new shopping centres. The others in this category do not seem to come even close.

Now back to *Plac Zbawiciela*, to check *Mesa*, just above a fish shop to the right.

Fish: *Mesa* has been always there, with quality varying over the years. Ages ago, it was a good place to come for a glass (or two) of vodka — they would run out of fish courses early in the day. I have no idea what it is like now. Pity there is nothing to recommend among fish and seafood places in Warsaw: *Delfin* feels pretentious, expensive and not really very good, *Rybak* falls into the *Old Town* category. The simplest and in my view, in spite of its looks and decor from the era long gone, the best fish restaurant nearby, *Pod Złotym Linem*, is not in Warsaw, out of your range on this occasion, I fear.

Between *Plac Zbawiciela* and *Plac Konstytucji*, to the left, hidden behind a line of huge pillars, there is an entrance to two restaurants. At the ground floor, *Suparom Thai* — about the only Thai place in Warsaw (no, sorry, there is another one among the *Old Town* places). Upstairs, *Dong Nam*.

Chinese-Vietnamese: We must have passed quite a few Chinese and/or Vietnamese places by now. Somehow, I have not felt like mentioning any of them, but there is no way to disregard this cuisine in Warsaw. They seem to be everywhere, especially in the form of smaller and larger “fast-food” kiosks.

Dong Nam is of course in quite a different category: solidly good food, well-prepared and nicely served. There are a few other such good places in Warsaw: *CesarSKI Pałac* has the reputation of perhaps the best Chinese restaurant in Warsaw, Beijing duck is not bad in *Pekin* (but you have to order it a day in advance), you can enjoy good Vietnamese meals in *Hoang Kim*. But I just cannot quite raise my level of enthusiasm for these places too high, sorry.

We are now in *Plac Konstytucji*. At the corner to the left, you can stop at *U Szwejka* for a number of typical Polish dishes, including white sausage and *gotąbki* — true, this goes in best of you can have it outdoors with a good beer, but since the latter can be ensured, the former can be resigned. If you go around the corner, you can enter *Ugarit*, which a few years ago gained independence from the hotel it used to serve, changed name and moved away from the Polish cuisine.

Middle-East: *Ugarit* serves good food, with excellent starters and even better sweets to finish up — but for me this is just an excuse to mention two other places.

First, *Le Cedre*, at the other side of *Wisła*. Go there for their set menu, which properly begins with numerous starters. The variety of small cold appetisers is enormous, from classical humus to salad-like dishes. The hot dumplings of a few kinds that come next are perhaps even better. I was there a couple of times with friends who do not exactly restrain themselves when it comes to food, but each time no energy and room was left for the main course, and excellent kebabs were left on the table. On the top of this, their house wine came at a reasonable price, and a few bottles went in excellently with the dinner.

The other is a true Lebanese jewel in Warsaw: *Samira*. No chance for you to find it on your own, it's carefully hidden in an *MPO*³ area with the only access by a small, really bumpy, construction road for the big *MPO* trucks. Do not expect wonders of top-class air-conditioning and decoration, it's all very basic, but I've been going there for a few years by now, from the times when they started as a small buffet with a couple of tables crowded over each other and only occasional visitors, until now, when they reached the size of more than a dozen of clean new tables with crowds coming especially here. All the time a nice feeling of a family business run by people who know what their food is about and love their job. Good variety of good starters, excellent main-course dishes. Perfect tea. If you do not fear the quantity, go for chef's plate, absolutely great in either meat or vegetarian version. Once there, have a look at the collection of nargilla pipes over the bar, and perhaps go into their grocery store.

Out of *Plac Konstytucji*, continue along *Marszałkowska*, with quite a few restaurants at both sides, and even more in smaller streets nearby. *Bacio* (see above) is to the left, but we will turn right into *Żurawia*, nearly, but not quite, reaching *Aleje Jerozolimskie*. This is on purpose, to avoid the ugly crossroad and the fast-food places of the commercial centre of Warsaw just behind *Aleje*. To the left of *Żurawia*, there is *India Curry* (see above), somewhat hidden from the street, roughly half way between *Marszałkowska* and *Krucza*, which we enter close to *Grand*, another of the hotels with rooms reserved for *ETAPS'03* participants.

Further along *Żurawia*, just after crossing *Krucza*, there is a line of restaurants among which *Compagna del Sole* is perhaps the most attractive, especially for lunch (see above). From here, it is easy to reach *Plac Trzech Krzyży* again — but to avoid closing a circle too early, let's turn left and continue north along *Krucza*. One benefit is that just after crossing *Aleje Jerozolimskie*, and turning back from McDonald's, we have *London Steak House*: perhaps the best steak-house in Warsaw. Soon we will reach *Chmielna*, a street busy with its boutiques and crowds of people — for whom quite a few eateries are available. No, nothing really tempting before *Świętokrzyska*, certainly not for dinner, although I hear that a bit further, around *Sienkiewicza*, a few places deserve a late-night attention.

2.5 *Plac Piłsudskiego* and *Senatorska*

Once you cross *Świętokrzyska*, you're close to *Plac Piłsudskiego* with hotels *Victoria* and *Europejski* — but before going there, the area of *Mazowiecka* must attract your attention for a few good reasons.

The first one is *Kuźnia Smaku*, offering a good feel of comfort and quality: atmosphere, service, food. Food above all: a superbly refined Polish cuisine, with each item on the menu calling for coming back here again and again. Order by putting your finger randomly at some starter and a main course — nothing is less than excellent here. When it comes to the deserts though, ask for *kisiel żurawinowy*. Not that the others are much less attractive, but I found this traditional Polish jelly desert, surrounded by golden small leaves, absolutely irresistible. At the top of my list!

The other one is *Roma II*, a sibling restaurant to *Roma* (see above).

The third is *Varna*, an original, truly Bulgarian place. Why haven't I been there yet, given the consistently enthusiastic reviews they get?

Now through *Plac Piłsudskiego*, toward the National Opera. To the right of the building there is really only one restaurant, *Klub Magellan* — again, a reliable source of good food at high prices.

So, let's go to the left of the Opera, where there are a good dozen of restaurants lined up. Nice *Corrazzi* with a lovely feel of a home-like place, a range of "bars" (*Zanzi-bar*, *Bar-bados*, *Rabar-bar*), places I have mentioned above (*El Popo*, *Cesarski Pałac*, *Pekin*), and a few others. This line leads you to the left into *Senatorska*, going directly to *Plac Bankowy*. There, a couple of pubs/restaurants: *Der Elefant* and *U Fiszera*. The latter is a place for ribs, served covered with sweet honey taste — quite good, especially accompanied by a meter of beer (yes, a meter: one meter long glass tube piling above your table while you empty it of its 5 litre contents).

Sorry, wrong direction again: back along *Senatorska*, in front of the Opera, to reach *Plac Zamkowy* in front of the *Royal Castle*. In this way you have missed a lovely walk along *Krakowskie Przedmieście*, and a chance to

³Sorry, I will provide no translation.

walk down toward *Wista*, where at *Dobra* you could find *Tokio* (see above) or even closer, *Biblioteka*. The new building of the university library, apart from a few books and a quiet place to sit and read, offers lovely roof gardens (what do they look like at this time of the year?), a bowling place, and this restaurant which has already made its name for good food and extensive, high-quality (and high-price) Italian wine list. I had a pleasure to be there for a pre-arranged exclusive dinner, perhaps one of the best dinners I ever had. If what they offer in their menu is half as good as what we had then, it is well worth a detour.

2.6 *Stare Miasto*

Anyway, we are in *Plac Zamkowy* now. Before entering the *Old Town*, it's worth looking into *Literacka*, a lovely café with nice piano music upstairs, and a serious restaurant downstairs. Their *żurek* turned out to be nearly as good as at home, and this is a high recommendation indeed. Game dishes were a very befitting follow-up.

Time to enter the small streets of *Stare Miasto*, the Old Town. Basically, whichever way you choose, end up at *Rynek*, the Market Square, with nearly each house around it providing a room for at least one restaurant. Some of them have a good reputation and seem to be mentioned in all tourist guides. But attractive as the place is, it is a typical tourist trap. And so are its restaurants. No, they are not really bad, you usually get decent food there, with some places offering a great menu and quite imaginative recipes. But more often than not, you're treated there as a one-time visitor, with all the consequences: fast service pushing you out to make room for further guests, high prices not really compatible with the standard offered, and worst of all, quite erratic quality of food.

So, if you have to eat around here, at least leave *Rynek*. There are two streets at every corner, so you have quite a choice. For instance, go into *Jezuicka*. Out of an old sentiment (it used to be one of very few places to take a foreigner to dine out without fear) rather than because of any recent experience, let me mention *Świętoszek* there. Formally a club, so that you have to book in advance (I remember always being asked if I am a member: I am yet to discover what happens when one answers positively; after a simple "no", things proceed as usual and one gets a table). Good quality Polish and international cuisine, high prices. I recall Chateaubriand properly prepared there years ago, put on fire in front of my table. They stopped serving things in this way because of the fire regulation. . .

Tsarina, nearly opposite, is a much more recent development. High-class, high-prices, Russian cuisine (is it the only Russian restaurant in Warsaw?). On the weekends they offer an excellent set menu of 10 (or is it 9?) dishes to try all those excellent Russian specialities.

The opposite corner of the Market Square offers perhaps a still better way to leave the Old Town through *Barbakan*, a low and solid defence tower. Just behind it, to the left, you find *Kompania Piwna*. Did I write that *Adler* is the best place for Bavarian food? Well, of course it is, but if you want a pleasant noisy evening with a group of friends over solid food and beer, you can certainly come here as well.

Back to *Barbakan*, toward *Nowe Miasto* (the New Town) along *Freta*. Few steps, and right at the corner of *Długa* we have *Pod Samsonem*: as mentioned above, good Polish-Jewish cuisine; perhaps the best value for money in this part of town.

Continuing along *Freta*, you may want to stop for a home-made cake at a cafe-gallery *Belle Epoque* — cakes are okay, coffee so-so, but everything there is for sale, so watch out, you may be walking out with some chandelier as one of my good friends did once (well, I did as well).

From there, you soon come to the New Town Market, with a few good restaurants at the left. *Freta 33* comes first — simple place in fact, though with an artistic feel; the menu is rather short, but quite interesting. I recall some perfect mushroom dishes in the Autumn; will it be the same in April? *Fret@Porter* just a few steps away seems seriously more serious, with its heavy decor and a bit pompous menu. It may be pompous but the quality and a touch of good culinary imagination are there — check it out at CMCS dinner (April 5).

2.7 Near *Ochota* campus

Sorry, not too much on offer here. *Hoang Kim*, mentioned above, is here. So is *Meltemi*.

Greek: Surprised? I have not mentioned a Greek place so far. There are few in the centre of Warsaw, but it seems that the most attractive ones are at the outskirts. *Meltemi* is one of them: simple furniture, simple decor, simple space. Good, enjoyable Greek food, with excellent range of starters and good main dishes. They do have a wine list, but their simplest retsina is the best — and quite affordable, which starts mattering when in a bigger party you really want to enjoy the evening. *Santorini* deserves much the same comments (in fact, the owners are the same, I believe) — except that it is perhaps a more cosy place, so I would go there for a dinner for two rather than with a big party.

Gospoda Pod Kogutem is a proper place to mention at the end our tour of Warsaw restaurants: quite basic, quite standard, with no pretence to go up-market. Simple cooking of some usual Polish dishes at very reasonable prices. Just right to enjoy an evening with a few friends, over a few glasses of good beer, and food which requires no celebration.

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* — the places I know and like,

** — ...and would recommend,

*** — ...or even put at the top of my list

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