

Dining in Warsaw

— Hints for ETAPS 2003 Participants —

— ERRATA —

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Foreword

I've written the original document rather in rush, with no sufficient time for polishing the text, and certainly no time, energy and resources to refresh the experiences that underlie the hints captured there. No wonder, soon after the text was distributed among the participants of ETAPS'03, some corrections started flowing in, and new occasions to check out some old and new places arose.

The present growing document accumulates gradually some of them, by both commenting on my previous opinions and extending the list of places worth thinking about.

Addendum

Chianti (2003): Serious disappointment. My original comments, praising highly the quality and the feel of the place, were based on a rather early experience of a few visits there quite a while ago. Unfortunately, recently some reliable negative reports have reached me: too loud a music, erratic service and, worst of all, food definitely below the expected quality. Removing *, with much regret, but most definitely...

Bacio di Angelo (Summer 2003): Very mixed feelings after a recent visit there. Overall impression: a newly open place which still has to grow up to the label (**Bacio**) to justify its immediate popularity. Food was okay, with some items making long waiting for the incompetent service justifiable. Very good, quite original and tasty salads: for instance, warm leaves of iceberg lettuce with pieces of chicken breast in sesame seeds and dressing just right for this. Disappointing pasta with huge quantity of creamy sauce that made it feel more like a Polish soup than pasta. Excellent duck! Bringing back lovely memories of perhaps my first experience of a nice place and good cuisine in the early days of my studies in Warsaw: a wild duck with apples in **Kamienna Schodki** — now both the dish as served there and the place very much in the Old-Town-tourist-trap category.

Mesa (Summer 2003): I used some caution when writing about fish restaurants in Warsaw. A recent brief visit to **Mesa** proved this to be quite justified. Interior and decoration as elegant as I recall it from the seventies (and not really changed since then — feel free to interpret this comment as you wish). Pleasant and competent staff. Good selection of Polish vodkas; wines mostly German, not much more than one of a kind: sweet, semi-sweet, semi-dry and dry(-ish). Good list of fish dishes — and what I had was not too bad. I like marinated fried fish: the essence of such a starter was good, but unexpectedly I had to dig through a massive amount of jelly to rich it. For the main course, I asked for a sander baked in foil: the fish was fresh and good. Pity it was almost floating in a watery sauce and a layer of tomato slices separated it from any spices in use. No, no desert — an urgent phonecall prevented me from further exploration of the menu. Overall impression: if you're nearby, a lunch there will not hurt you, but don't expect marvels, and do not go there if a long, truly enjoyable meal is what you're after.

E. Wedel (Summer 2004): The full Polish name is **Pijalnia Czekolady E. Wedel**, which translates to something like *E. Wedel Chocolate Parlour*. **E. Wedel** is a name long and well known for its chocolate products, with a big factory and a few shops throughout Warsaw. Next to the best known among the shops, at *Szpi-*

*talna*¹, for as long as I recall (since mid seventies?) they've ran a small, elegant *chocolateria*, where you can drink a cup of quite a delicious, thick, rich and very hot chocolate — no, I do not think you can easily manage more than one cup, especially if you're still planning a dinner that evening. For years nothing else was served here; but now it seems they've expanded the offer by a range of quite good chocolate deserts, as well as some other drinks. Still, the hot chocolate is the thing to enjoy here most. Aha: in case you wonder, as I did, if the small fountain in their first room sprinkles water or chocolate, do not resist for too long, check as soon as the waitress is away.

Bacio (Summer 2004): After the mixed experience of *Bacio di Angelo*, I was hesitant about going back to the original — but on this occasion the decision was not up to me, and I must admit my hesitation proved totally unjustified. I ended up upgrading *Bacio* up at my private list of Warsaw excellence after this visit.

Is it quite as enjoyable as *Roma*? Maybe not quite, but who cares after all, when both are just very, very good. Nice starters, excellent pastas (a warning from the waiter, fully justified: “*A starter, a pasta and then a main course? No, you will not manage to finish. . .*”). Stronger of us refused to accept the comment, but just in case went for half portions of pasta. The decision proved right: my mushroom sauce for pasta was full of the strong aroma of fresh ceps (and the half portion would certainly pass as a main course in a few places I know). But then the main course was worth finishing to the very end: *Something for you* proved to be quite similar to what I marvelled about in *Roma*, which confirms that the two places have more in common than just a general reference to Italian cuisine. *Bacio*'s house wine was still as drinkable as on previous occasions, and going in perfectly well with their food. The only pity was that I am yet to discover the quality of their deserts.

Varna (Summer 2004): Hm. . . I must admit, I somehow expected more. The first impression put me off a bit: nothing special in the decor, nothing special in the place, everything rather roomy but with no visible good idea how to sell the place. And empty — we were nearly the only guests throughout the evening. The food improved the impression considerably. First, the starter: a plate of various meats, made to the original Bulgarian recipes (we were told, and I tend to believe this from what I tasted). Then the main course, which really brought at least my humour up: one of the best pieces of lamb I ever had. For desert: baklava, here in a somewhat more sizable and cake-like disguise than I expected — but the variation served it very well indeed. I admit though that the drinks throughout the dinner were perhaps the best of all: an occasional glass of rakija, some very decent Bulgarian wine at a bargain price (advised by the waiter, thank you!), and excellent Bulgarian brandy to round the evening up.

Villa Nuova (April 2005): First visit, and immediate three stars from me! I am not sure if this is really the best place in Warsaw, as I hypothesised in the original text, but it certainly comes close. Very first impression: excellent, wonderful location next to the Palace in Wilanów, in a nice villa, with some wonderfully green yard around it. Elegant interior, with comfortable sofas for a pre-dinner drink, and glass-walled veranda with just the right number of tables to make it look roomy but not empty. There were not too many people (in fact, only two more tables were taken — we were told the place had been full with a wedding party on the previous night). The service was highly competent, not too imposing, keeping their distance but always ready to help exactly when they were needed. So, superficial factors: very good indeed. And now to the merits.

Wine list: high quality, extensive choice, but we settled on their recommendation, a very decent French red at a very decent price, selected for the house (very similar property-labelled wine was priced twice as much). High score on this as well.

Menu: just excellent and extremely tempting, item by item! No room to mention all here, so let's concentrate on what we tried. For starters we shared brains, livers and sweetbread — you can see from our choice that we were Poles in a French company. Veal brains served on toast, Polish style, turned out exciting mostly due to the lack of this delicacy in the standard menu in these BSE-aware days. Otherwise it was a bit flat and boring to my taste. But the two other starters were truly exciting. Poultry livers, fried just right, served with apple and onions to make them even sweeter — quite a few years ago we had (actually, the same company) a goose liver salad in **99**, described by one guide as “taste-buds orgasm”; this was quite a similar experience! And the sweetbread (I am not even sure if this is the right translation of Polish *grasica* and French *ris de veau*), served with slightly fried pear as a basis for a salad propped up with a delicate dressing, was perhaps even better! Main courses turned out a bit in the *cuisine nouveau* direction — with imagination and some non-standard touches to the classical ideas. One was traditional Polish *zrazy* — but wild-boar *zrazy*, with the meet prepared in a way that felt wild game, but was at the same time delicate without any touch of toughness. These came imaginatively stuffed with plums (adding both sweetness and a smell of smoke) and

¹The place to put this in the main tour would be just after we crossed *Chmielna* at the end of Sect. 2.4, perhaps instead of the remark “nothing really tempting before *Świętokrzyska*”.

classically served with my favourite buckwheat, *kasza gryczana*, accompanied by an excellent sauce. The other (my choice) was a simple sirloin — simple, but truly high quality pieces of beef, fried just as required, accompanied by great fried potatoes and with sauce bearnaise served aside. And the last was very simple, delicate and light: lamb chops, just perfect!

The main courses not only were in the *cuisine nouveau* style, but also came in somewhat *cuisine nouveau* sizes: we were quite full, but deserts were still conceivable. So, let's give way to the temptation — and this was about the best culinary decision we ever made! One of us is a *crème brûlée* lover (and expert); so this had to be it. And it was: their *crème brûlée* was truly excellent, surely the best in Warsaw, and closely approaching the quasi-mythical by now *crème brûlée* once served in a small place lost in *Massif-Central*, which (together with a helping asked for at breakfast) will stay forever in our best memories. The second choice was a chocolate cake, served under a tricky name to suggest what it really was: a perfect chocolate cake, freshly made, slightly sugared and hiding within a good portion of hot, black, high-quality, liquid chocolate! But the true highlight of the evening was called something like “fruit from the oven”, which named a selection of fresh berries (straw-, blue-, ras-...) covered with sweet custard sauce and indeed, put into an oven for a while, to make all this properly hot and covered with a wonderfully crispy top. What else can I add...

Pod Złotym Linem (May 2005): Things are not as they used to be... They moved to a new location, few more kilometres away from Warsaw (see the list below). This is not much of a problem. But they also moved further away from the quality I recall from a few years ago.

The new place is nice from the outside, but the interior features a quasi-modern display of kitsch in a single big dining hall (no non-smoking section!). We started with an excellent marinated *sielawa* — good choice, one of my favourites. For the main course: the trade mark of the place, fish in sour creme. The fish (we went for a zander and a perch) was truly excellent, fresh and tasty — but the sour creme sauce that covered it was flat, heavy and made so artificially thick with something which kept growing in our stomachs for hours.

So, I would have kept the stars for the fish, but not for the restaurant anymore. Disappointment!

Złoty Lin (May 2005): The place that inherited location from the old *Pod Złotym Linem* and apparently valued the old label enough to use a name sufficiently similar that nearly all passers-by are tricked and stop as if it was the old, well-famed place. After a not so good experience in the new *Pod Złotym Linem* (see above), we decided to try the inheritor on our way back to Warsaw — but failed miserably due to enormous traffic jams that delayed us far more than anyone dreamed of...

So, no news on this one, as yet.

Deska (May 2005): Discovery of the season: there are places around the corner where you can eat very decently, in a more than pleasant atmosphere! And your wallet can stand the visit with no problem.

Deska works like a small Italian place, with plenty of pizza and pasta in the menu, but this is not a pizzeria at all. Good selection of starters, excellent salads (which if needed can serve as a light meal on their own — though I prefer to treat them as starters) and a good list of main courses: perhaps not overly long, but just right for everyone to find something to their taste. I settled on a pork sirloin (some purist may criticise me that this is a contradiction, but I have no idea how to better say in English *połędwiczki wieprzowe*), covered with a great cheese-based sauce, propped up with some smoked tomatoes, accompanied by a baked potato imaginatively stuffed with ratatouille. Excellent! Wine list not overimposing, well selected though and very reasonably priced (as everything in this place). Decent smaller wines served by glass, which in this place is an asset as well.

Very good service: always there when needed, friendly and efficient — and all the time with a nice smile.

When you add that this is located just one metro station (or, as I've just measured on my bike, 1647 metres — is this almost exactly one mile?) away from my place, you can be sure that they will see more of me soon.

Stop press (May 2005): Yes, they've already seen more of me, this time in a larger company, to much of mine and their satisfaction. Not much new to add really, except to confirm the very good first impression of their wine list (this time researched more thoroughly), to try to recall a few more very good and enjoyable salads and main courses, and throw in more than edible tiramisu. More visits to come...

Additional/Modified Bibliography

* — the places I know and like,

** — ... and would recommend,

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

Bacio**: Wilcza 43, tel. 626 8303

Bacio di Angelo: Wilcza 8, tel. 622 4454

Chianti: Foksal 17, tel. 828 0222

Deska*: Komisji Edukacji Narodowej 36,
tel. 448 3676

Kamienne Schodki: Rynek Starego Miasta 26,
tel. 831 0822

Mesa: Plac Zbawiciela 4, tel. 628 4459

Pod Złotym Linem: Gzowo 25C, tel. (0)23 892 1023

Varna: Mazowiecka 12, tel. 827 2601

Villa Nuova***: St. Kostki Potockiego 23,
tel. 885 1502

E. Wedel: Szpitalna 8, tel. 827 2916

Złoty Lin: Wierzbica 9, tel. 782 7473