

CRACOVIA

EATING OUT

Krakowianka Restaurant

AT THE CRACOVIA CLUB

With authentic dishes and an impressive range of vodka, this Polish restaurant in Perth is keeping alive the traditions of the old country.



Clockwise from top: The restaurant mural is a fond reminder of times past; enjoying a meal while watching the soccer; one of the club's soccer teams; Cracovia Club president Jolanta Kacperka with her daughter Natalia; a plate of *pierogi* (fried pork dumplings).





On the fringes of Perth, where paddocks meet new estates, a walled green soccer field is an unexpected sight. These are the grounds of the Cracovia Club, founded in 1950 by Polish post-war immigrants, which exists for the love of soccer, tradition and Polish countrymen, who, upon disembarking, paid back their passage with hard labour in the bush. “The men worked and the women stayed at home looking after the children,” says Jolanta Kacperka, the club’s president. “They couldn’t speak English and couldn’t blend in. This was where they could feel at home,” she says of the club’s significance.

Despite not having soccer fields to call its own, the soccer club quickly found success. In 1978, it bought four hectares of land beyond the city limits, which was to become the present-day headquarters. Built by club members from mostly salvaged and donated materials, what stands today – the sporting grounds, community centre and Krakowianka Restaurant – is a testament to the strength and perseverance of these Polish migrants.

Like many Cracovia Club members, Jolanta and her young family arrived in Australia in 1986 to seek new lives after escaping communist Poland. “During martial law, there was no food. It could only be bought with ration vouchers,” explains Jolanta, whose hometown, Gdansk, was the birthplace of the trade union movement *Solidarno* (Solidarity) that eventually led to the fall of Communism in Poland.

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With travel restrictions and curfews, repression in Gdansk was severe. The family made countless attempts to get passports so they could leave the country. In the end, it was a lucky bureaucratic error that led to the issuing of their passports, and they began hatching an escape plan: while on excursion passes, they would ask for asylum in Italy.

“Only closest family members knew our plans and we were afraid to sell anything in case anyone guessed what we were planning,” Jolanta explains. “We were even afraid to take warm clothes. We left behind everything.”

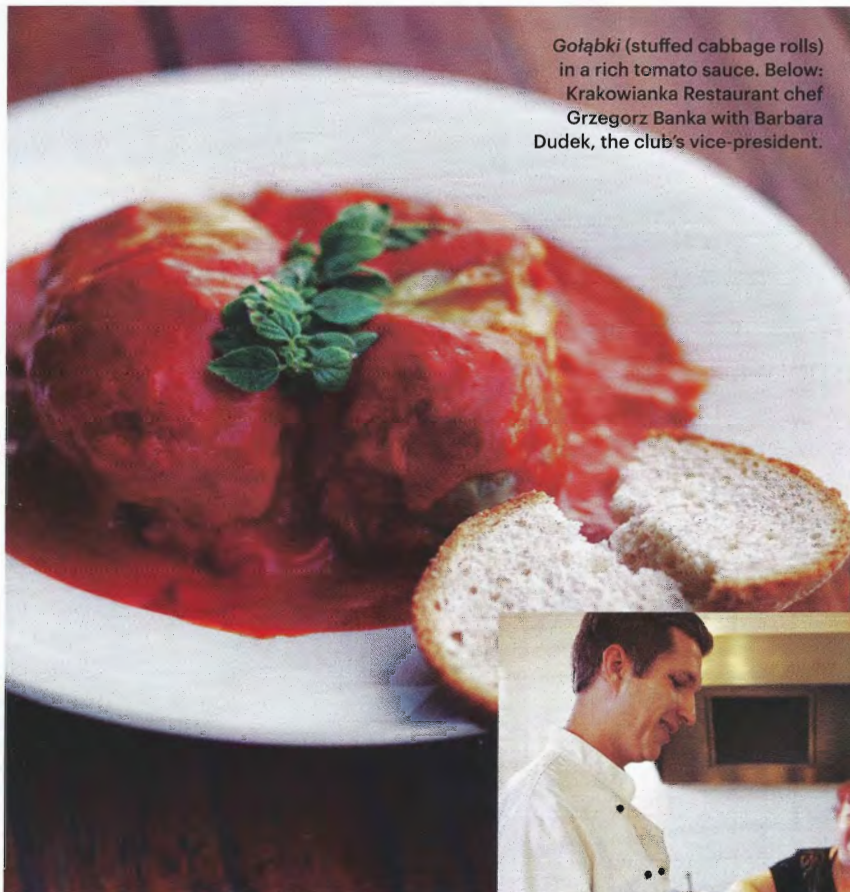
As their bus crossed the border, Jolanta started getting nervous, so, instead of waiting until they arrived in Italy, the family asked for asylum in the first country past the Iron Curtain. “After crossing the border into West Germany, the bus stopped for a break. We decided not to go back on board,” recalls Jolanta. German police intervened to retrieve their passports and the family waited for immigration papers in Hanover. “It took almost two years to get permission to enter

Australia,” says Jolanta, whose daughter, Natalia, was born soon after she arrived in Perth. “But I loved Australia from day one. Like everyone, I was hoping to blend in, so I stayed far away from other Polish people.”

Initially, she was reluctant to join the club. She soon changed tack. “I realised I needed Polish people. I understand the jokes, the food; it’s my culture, my tradition.” Two years ago, Jolanta was elected club president. As for the club, it remains strong with three soccer teams and 140 members.

“Soccer was very important to us in the past and this is still very much alive. After a game, everyone comes in for a meal,” Jolanta adds. With red tablecloths and folk pictures on the wall, the club’s restaurant Krakowianka, (meaning ‘girl from Kraków’, is a drawcard for younger generations. As Jolanta explains, “For them, Poland is not home. The young people come here because they’re nostalgic for their grandma’s cooking.”

Nina Micho migrated from Kraków, the country’s ancient capital, 30 years ago. She



Golabki (stuffed cabbage rolls) in a rich tomato sauce. Below: Krakowianka Restaurant chef Grzegorz Banka with Barbara Dudek, the club's vice-president.



now manages the restaurant kitchen staffed by club volunteers. The menu is reminiscent of Polish food from the 1980s, with classics such as *golabki* (cabbage rolls), *flaki* (tripe soup) and *barszcz* (borsch) all based on recipes that Nina learned from her mother. "Meat, flour and cabbage are the main ingredients of Polish food," says Nina, who's known for her *pierogi* (stuffed dumplings). With three types of stuffing to choose from, of which beef and sauerkraut is the most traditional, the dumplings are boiled, fried and served with lashings of sour cream.

During the week, Nina bakes crusty round loaves in anticipation for the weekend ahead. Hollowed out, these loaves act as bowls for *bigos w chlebie* (hunter's stew), a thick, smoky braise of pork, beef and sauerkraut in bread. The *golonka* (roasted pork shank), served with horseradish, is equally meaty. Considered to be Poland's national dish, *golonka* is fittingly served with vodka, the national drink.

"Polish people drink a lot, so they are perfectionists with *wodka* (vodka)," says Jolanta. Much like wine, this enthusiasm for vodka extends to pairing food with different varieties. Hence the bar has an impressive range of Polish vodka, ranging from the potato-distilled *Lukusowa* to the rye-based

Wyborowa and the lesser-known, herbal *Zubrowka*, which is often mixed with apple juice and eaten with potato pancakes. A perfect ending to a meal is a coffee spiked with cherry-infused vodka and a slice of Nina's fluffy cheesecake.

With this irresistible combination of food, vodka and soccer, the Cracovia Club is reaching out to its next generation of members. "It's our dream that the young people will push us out and replace us," says Jolanta. "We don't want to make a business of it. We want to be a club. And we want to keep it this way, for Polish people and the whole community to come, eat and drink."

Krakowianka Restaurant, Cracovia Club, 375 Marshall Rd, Beechboro, WA, (08) 9377 5711. Open weekends only: Fridays 6-10pm; Saturdays 6-9pm; Sundays 1-8pm. ☎

Polish flavours around Australia

VIC

AFTER THE TEARS

You can't go wrong with their famous borsch, but why not try the Baltic Sea *zakąski* (tasting plate) of rollmops, salmon and salt cod lavished with dill pickles and horseradish, or soak up the formidably stocked vodka bar with the many varied *przekąski* (small dishes) on offer. **9b Gordon St, Elsternwick, (03) 9523 0969, afterthetears.net.**

NSW

ALCHEMY POLISH CAFE RESTAURANT

This chandeliered cafe is heaven for enthusiasts of *pierogi* (stuffed dumpling). Serving three types of potato dumpling, plus Polish classics such as borsch with croquettes of beef and *Kujawiake* (pork with mushroom and sauerkraut), be sure to arrive hungry and leave room for the delicious, fruit-filled pancakes with cream. **572 Crown St, Surry Hills, (02) 9699 2455, alchemy-restaurant.com.**

QLD

THE POLISH PLACE

With breathtaking views of the Great Dividing Range, a Polish folk-themed interior and chalet-style setting, diners stepping inside are transported to Poland's mountainous south. Bring your appetite and dig into the signature *golonka* (pork hock) cooked in beer. This is Polish hospitality at its best. **333 Main Western Rd, Tamborine Mountain, (07) 5545 1603, polishplace.com.au.**

SA

MAMA'S PIEROGI

With an extensive range of dumplings, ranging from *kopytka* (similar to gnocchi) to fruit-filled *knedle*, there's much more than *pierogi* on offer here. If you can't beat the lunchtime crowds, pick up some frozen *pierogi*, available in both sweet and savoury varieties, to get your fix at home. **96 Gawler Place, Adelaide, (08) 8212 9457, mamaspierogi.com.au.**