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Crocus Restaurant Taps Into Milwaukee's Polish Heritage

Authentic, affordable food in a warm environment

By Jeff Beutner



Despite Milwaukee's strong Polish heritage, the area's Polish restaurants haven't fared well in recent times. Names like Cracovia and Fountain Blue are memories of the past, and now only two remain: Polonez and Crocus.

Don't be fooled by the outside of Crocus' 13th Street location: The forbidding exterior gives way to a warm interior.

Crocus offers a bar at the entrance and two dining rooms, though one is used mainly for special events. Décor consists of prints of people dressed in Polish folk costumes and a collection of dolls near the kitchen entrance. The chairs at the tables are "banquet hall" basic, but the charming booths offer more comfort.

Appetizers and salads are nonexistent on a menu that only strays from Poland for a few seafood entrees and the Friday fish fry. The Polish options, listed in English and Polish, include pierogi, blintz and bigos. Bigos is a sauerkraut and meat stew.

The menu lists two soups, but they are usually bypassed since entrees include a soup of the day. The optional soups include beef tripe (Warsaw style) and czarnina, a soup of prunes and duck blood. Outside of the Friday clam chowder, the soups tend to be vegetarian. There are Ukrainian borschts made with beets or cabbage plus a host of other vegetables. While the cauliflower soup has the main ingredient outnumbered by carrots and pasta, do not shy away from the sauerkraut soup: It is one of the best options, with bits of smoked pork, potato, carrot and barley—not at all salty and just a bit tart. On some days you might find dill pickle soup, which is the most requested recipe. It has a base of beef broth plus cabbage, potato, celery and leek. The pickles add a hint of tartness in this memorable soup.

Vegetarians will find few options, but meat eaters will be in their element. One of the best items is the crazy wolowe, also called beef roll-ups, in German rouladen. Thin slices of beef, so tender a fork can cut them, are wrapped around pickle and bacon. Rich gravy with mushroom and onion adds to the flavor. There are also small flour dumplings that look like an oversized version of spaetzle. Golabki (\$8.50) is stuffed cabbage filled with rice and minced meat. They are topped with a mild tomato sauce and include a side of boiled potatoes.

Pierogis (\$10.50) are filled dumplings that are steamed before they are quickly pan-fried. The menu lists several choices for fillings: seasoned minced beef; sauerkraut and mushroom; sweet cheese; and a Russian-style preparation with a blend of cheese and potato. They are served with a small dish of sour cream.

Friday seems to be the busiest day, thanks to the popular fish fry. The fry of choice is the yellow perch (\$10.75), with filets that have a light, slightly seasoned batter. The excellent potato pancakes, as thin as crepes, help to balance a dull side of coleslaw and tartar sauce that is too sweet. Be warned that at times the kitchen does run out of the perch.

The priciest dinner entrée is pork chops a la Crocus at \$13.50, so this is a very affordable place. The smaller lunch menu features entrees in the \$8 to \$11 range. It may seem like a meat-and-potatoes restaurant, but keep in mind that, with the exception of the fish fry, virtually nothing is deep-fried, adding a healthy aspect to the meal. Service is always pleasant, and some servers even have a trace of an authentic Polish accent. This is one of the best places to experience the flavors of ethnic Milwaukee.