

Wednesday, September 17, 2008

Polish Lunch

Hearty portions at Crocus

By David Lührssen



The Poles poured into Milwaukee during the late 19th century and afterward, settling on the city's South Side where industry flourished and factory jobs were plentiful. Before long, Polish-American business districts sprang up with shops, bakeries and restaurants catering to the tastes of the immigrants and their children.

As recently as 20 years ago, at least four Polish restaurants were still open in Milwaukee. Now there are just two, Polonez and Crocus.

Although most of the South Side's Polish-American population moved farther south and west to the suburbs after the 1970s, Crocus clings to its urban address. The rambling building includes a bar to the side and a hall for receptions in back. The dimly lit dining room is reminiscent of Old Milwaukee restaurants with narrow booths along one wall and a plethora of metal-legged, upholstered chairs around the Formica tables covered with white linen. The walls are decorated with woven efforts at folk art, platters emblazoned with the Polish eagle and other ethnic knickknacks.

Crocus is nothing fancy in appearance, but the food is good and the service is friendly. As with most restaurants, regardless of ethnicity or cuisine, lunch is a good time to find bargains.

When in Polonia, why not eat Polish? The ethnic end of Crocus' lunch menu offers solid value, with prices starting at \$6.50 for the dessert-like blintzes filled with either cherries or cheese and going no higher than \$8.50 for a veal cutlet. Polish food is hearty fare and the portions, even at lunchtime, are likewise.

Characteristic of the Polish offerings is the kroszka (\$6.75), a thinly layered but massively proportioned crepe stuffed with mushrooms and sweet cabbage.

As in many ethnic restaurants, there are adaptations to American tastes. Keeping company with the strictly Yankee items on the menu's American side is the tasty Polish hamburger (\$6.50), covered in mushrooms and a brown sauce.

If Friday means fish, then Crocus is also a good place for lunch on the final day of the workweek. Choose between baked or fried cod (\$8.95) or perch (\$10.95). The fried cod is excellent in its light breading. All of the fish entrees are tender and white, with none of the rubbery gray texture that signals a restaurant cutting corners to save costs. The fish is served with coleslaw and choice of french fries or a pair of more Polish options, boiled potatoes or potato pancakes.

All lunches come with a bread basket and the soup of the day, which at recent visits was either a peppery cheese and broccoli or minestrone ladled with carrots, tomatoes, potatoes and other vegetables. Along with Old World charm, Crocus offers another asset not always provided by restaurants nowadays: The food is served piping hot.

CROCUS 3577 S. 13th St. (414) 643-6383 \$-\$\$ Credit Cards: MC, VS, AmEx Smoking: At bar

Crocus | Photo by Don Rask