

MELTDOWN MEALS

BY MICHAEL HIRSCH



Restaurant: Polish Village Cafe

Dish: Meatballs, Mashed Potatoes, Sauerkraut

Price: \$20 cash including tip

I feel like most food reviews I've read focus so much on the food and the positive or negative emotions they elicit. Meltdown Meals isn't really about that. It's about the discomfort that pushed me to eat somewhere alone rather than some halcyon of memory of a dish that felt like my bubbie cooked it. In fact I call her my grandmother, not bubbie, and her cooking is solid but her cousin Helen was the one known more for the cooking. And she certainly didn't pass any of her cooking knowledge to my own mother who raised me on Maruchan Cup Ramen and frozen Costco cheeseburgers. Fine.

I've Friendzoned multiple Hinge matches just to have someone to get brunch with. So dining alone at Hamtramck's Polish Village wasn't something out of the ordinary. When I went down the basement stairs, I was skeptical, but immediately upon entering the dining room, I was converted. Twinkling lights and stained glass painted the room with a soothing bath of color. The notes of the Bill Evans Trio being played over the soundsystem dropped into the honey texture of the room like ice cubes plunking into a glass of Wiśniówka (Polish cherry liqueur). I waded past a family of four, two young daughters dressed in matching Detroit Lions jerseys with their mom and dad. Another table of eight middle-aged women, presumably former co-workers, or a rotary club, or both.

I asked if I could sit at the bar. The stained glass panels behind the bottles of liquor were massively appealing to me. Their warm color is something I felt compelled to bask in. This put me in the perfect position to hear the conversations of everybody in the entire restaurant. I could tune in and out as I saw fit. Silently invading the privacy of my fellow diners is always the most fun way to dine alone, because in that way I'm not all the way alone.

In one single motion the waiter came by dropping a basket of bread in front of me as I put in an order of polish meatballs and gravy. Pickle soup to start.

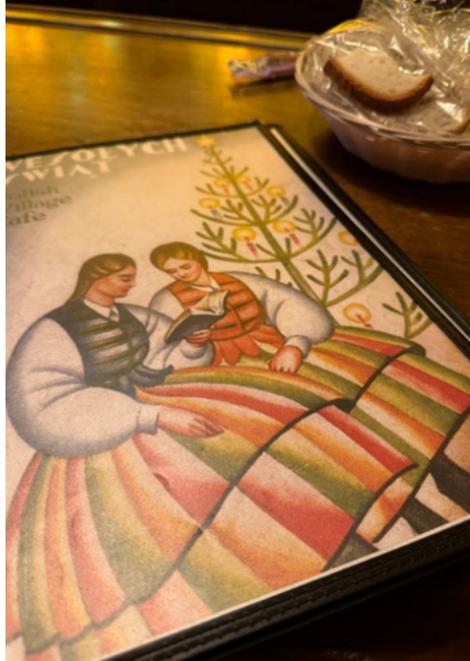
Sauerkraut and green beans on the side. Just water to drink. Stoned and impatient, I started going to town on the individually wrapped slices of bread.

Smearing as much butter as I could per side and tuning into the conversations around me.

The middle aged women had been drinking and their conversation had melted into bawdy banter.

One of them took a seat with the family of four and complimented them.

“You have such a lovely family,” she said, before diving into 20 different reasons why they warmed her heart. She was right, but I was in a cynical mood, starving for gravy-doused meatballs, and the interaction made me itch.



Here I am, like an actual insane person. A spewing bloated freak, with frazzled hair like I was struck by lightning I pondered alone. It was awesome. The jazz piano drips notes over my ears and a bowl of hot green pickle soup materializes on the bar in front of the stained glass. Exactly what I wanted.



This is one of those tangy creamy dishes that sounds unappealing to the uninitiated but if you know, you know, and if you're open minded, I hope this puts you on. Soft morsels of potato and pickle provide texture to the silky and acidic broth. The corporate chefs at Panera would have ragefits over this. If you gave broccoli cheddar soup a gun and a passport it would return 3 months later as the Polish Village pickle soup. It helped settle me in but it wasn't what I came for, which was beef.

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This was supposed to be a meal in solace to quietly celebrate a new job. Something to placate me while I put my dreams on hold. My daydreams are always drifting into this brand of existential doom. My thoughts inevitably veer towards politics and the economy, I'm barely educated enough to feel modern society's inescapable dread.



The rotary club shuffling out snapped me back into reality where a steaming plate of sauced up meatballs was placed on the bar in front of the stained glass. I was supposed to be a comedian but I guess I have meatballs you know.



I dug into the mashed potatoes first. Anything covered in homemade beef gravy automatically gets 2 points added onto its final score, a rule I've had in place since spending the end of my teenage years in the land of poutine (Quebec). They're exactly what you could've wanted from a working man's side dish, depth and unctuousness from the gravy elevated a rather dense pile of potato. I was in love.



The green beans were something a pioneer would've eaten hunched over some campfire. I guess cuisine from the eastern bloc isn't necessarily known for green beans, but I still wanted something more than just canned nothing. They were squeaky between the teeth and decomposed into a sort of mush. Thank god for the fermented funk of the sauerkraut ripping me back into reality and perfectly setting the stage for my meatballs.

I should end the review here. I very much enjoyed my time at Polish Village and will return over and over and over again. The meatballs were perfect. I don't know what else to say about them except that I want to eat them again right now. They weren't overcooked. They melted and dapped up my tastebuds with sauce and slow cooked beef. I felt good, not light but satiated. You know, I'm prone to eating all kinds of bullshit throughout the course of a typical week. I wake up and my gut gurgles like a cacophony of noises produced by some whirring and clunking machine at some monstrous factory.

My anxiety-driven pursuit of creativity has only served to make me feel bad. Meatballs won't fix anything either, but they'll fill the space in between. Between panic and purpose is a space with stained glass and jazz. In the down-home basement of Polish Village.

Polish Village Cafe
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