



A portrait of Polish cuisine

By Leslie Wu

From pride in ingredients to a newfound and complex idea of national identity, the cuisine of Poland is evolving both within its borders and on the international stage.

One of the people driving the conversation of food in Poland is Wojciech Modest Amaro, chef and owner of the country's first Michelin-starred restaurant, Atelier Amaro. Author of two cookbooks and head judge on Poland's versions of Top Chef and Master Chef, Amaro's hyper-locality springs from his "calendar of nature," a meticulously detailed listing of ingredients.

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1. Chef Wojciech Modest Amaro. 2. On set at Top Chef Poland. 3, 4 and 5. Scenes from the show floor at the 2015 edition of the Polagra Food Fair in Poznan.

"For me, Polish cuisine is based on the flavours of the forest," says Amaro. "I treat seasonality not as four-season blocks as is the norm, but as 52-week periods, divided into natural areas as they exist, such as lake, river, sea, mountain, meadow, field, farm and forest," he says.

When talking about a culinary identity, Amaro references Polish royal cuisine, which was influenced by French, German and Italian cooking.

"We were the track between Western Europe and the Far East, so all sorts of ingredients used to travel through Poland in quantity and our cuisine was very much influenced," he says. "And on top of this, we were unlucky to have 30 years of communism, which felt like 50 years of blackout, when we were down to pierogies, a few cabbage dishes and pork chops and so on."

To Amaro, the opening of the free market has caused not only a newfound multitude of choice, but also a sense of awareness of the ingredients that grow within Poland's borders.

"We found out that we have great traditions and ingredients. In terms of local cuisine and terroir, we have this without any effort in particular," he says.

During the 39th week of the year, for example, there are 538 ingredients available at its peak in Poland, says Amaro.

"And we don't include mushrooms on that list, because we have 1,000 types of mush-

rooms, 70 per cent of which are protected by law," he adds.

Back to nature

A shift in focus towards ingredient-driven, health-conscious cuisine could be seen on the show floor of the 2014 Polagra Food Fair in Warsaw, which attracted more than 65,000 visitors, according to show organizers.

With halls spotlighting technology, gastronomy, hotels and other facets of hospitality, 1,300 exhibitors from 45 countries showed off their wares. In one hall, a spotlight on the dairy industry of Poland was a focus this year and two other halls highlighted processed fruit and vegetables, extensive meat options and sweets.

Certain booths, such as locally produced Moon Brothers, stressed the natural elements in its lemonades, root beer and other sodas.

Health food is a growing sector in Poland, with increased spotlight on methods of production and ingredients, especially for the export market. Within Poland's health care food industry, changes in consumer demand are causing manufacturers to consider new avenues.

"Ten years ago, people didn't care about refined sugars," Sante A. Kowalski Inc. board member Witold Szpak says during a site visit to the health food company headquarters in Warsaw. "Now, the younger generation in Poland

is looking at what they eat; they're examining ingredients, and the next step will extend that to methods of agriculture," he says.

The rise of food TV

Backstage at Top Chef Poland, the scene of three young chefs—sweating under the glare of stage lighting and the impassive gazes of the judging panel—is a familiar sight to regular viewers of food television. Programs such as this one play a crucial role in reaching a new generation of chefs and eaters in a country finding its gastronomic voice.

"We're starting to see more food television and cooking programs, which is creating more awareness with food in the next generation," says Szpak.

Amaro thinks television is creating an educational opportunity when it comes to cuisine in Poland.

"To write a new gastronomic program for the educational schools will take five years," says Amaro. "To get across the message on television, it takes two weeks and people will see the ingredients being used. The chefs are very young, but already experienced and full of ideas; that's the image that we're seeing."

By using them in local and national competitions, the next generation of Polish chefs is becoming confident with the country's ingredients, and young chefs are motivated to return to

Poland to open restaurants rather than staying abroad when they travel for stages; a very different scenario from when he was a young chef, says Amaro.

"I remember when I spent 10 years abroad and every head chef of mine would ask about Polish cuisine," he says. "And he's standing there and you can see the dishes he's preparing and I'm thinking 'What am I going to present to you, breaded pork chops?' I thought: 'I know hundreds of ingredients and I cannot build a single plate? That's impossible.'"

Through projects such as Forgotten Fields, which maps out producers and traditional techniques in danger of dying out with the next generation, as well as creating a 13,000-variety seed bank, Amaro hopes to continue to inspire future waves of chefs to continue cooking with a sense of place, focusing on the best the country has to offer.

"If even five years ago, you entered the schools and asked the students who they wanted to be when they grew up, they would usually say 'a football player'. Now, they shout: 'Chef!'" says Amaro. "We have to use this momentum for Polish cuisine. We're going in a good direction, and it's good to be a part of it."

This trip was made possible by the Polish Ministry of Economy, who did not review this article.

Tastes of Poland

1. **Bigos:** A meat, sauerkraut and wine stew.

2. **Smalec:** A hearty and rustic lard spread, often made with pork, onions and spices, depending on the area.

3. **Rogale swietomarcinskie:** A sweet croissant, which comes in iced and non-iced forms, that is a specialty of Poznan, which boasts its own museum devoted to this pastry.

4. **Zurek:** A sour rye soup with sausage, bacon or ham, sometimes served in an edible bread bowl.

5. **Pierogies:** A ubiquitous dumpling associated with the country, often served in Poland stuffed with fruit, such as wild blueberries.



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