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UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



Hungarian-style
pancake
ALEX GARCIA/THEBUNE

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

The problem with the food at a lot of local Polish restaurants is one of gloppiness. So many places make pierogi or stuffed cabbage in advance, holding them in steam tables or buffets where the dumplings dissolve into various states of glop. This is not the case at Smak-Tak (the name translates to "Delicious, yes!"), a 10-year-old Polish restaurant in Jefferson Park. The owner, Piotr Lakomy, has a commitment to serving fresh Polish fare that is unrivaled in Chicago. "We cook everything to order," he said. "We're family operated and each member of our family specializes in cooking something different. We don't use preservatives."

You can taste that commitment. A few years ago, I drove around Chicago sampling pierogi at 10 different restaurants in one day, and Smak-Tak's, which featured a whipped potato filling, a light dough wrapper and a glistening blanket of butter (\$9.99), were by far the best. Since then, I've become somewhat of a regular and Smak-Tak's quality persists. The Hungarian pancake (\$14.99) at Smak-Tak is not an over-steamed slimy mess, but instead a crisp and lacy potato pancake stuffed with meaty, spicy goulash. Silesian dumplings, tennis-ball sized potato dumplings stuffed with peppery beef, have a tendency toward gumminess, but Smak-Tak's

SMAK-TAK

5961 N. Elston Ave. 773-763-1123

Looks like: A knotty pine-covered ski chalet

Smells like: Garlicky links of freshly

grilled Polish sausage

Sounds like: The rapid-fire buzz of Polish-speaking diners

were airy and devoid of any kind of disturbing chewiness. The mushroom soup (\$3.50) often a watery brew punctuated by curdled cream and no discernible flavor, was thick and velvety. My mother grew up in Poland and is a very fine cook; Smak-Tak is the place I take her when she's in town.

While the food is refined, the dining room—filled with knotty woods, red-and-white checkered tablecloths and Tiffany-style stained glass chandeliers—is rustic and eclectic in a way that channels a Polish grandma's living room. Smak-Tak's Babcia-friendly confines are also very small. There are only a handful of tables, so if you're planning a visit, especially on a bustling weekend night, call ahead and make a reservation.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@REDEYECRICK.COM | @REDEYEATORBINK