

## **The Strange Case of the Zapiekanka – And the Kielbasa Man in his Kielbasa Van**

Zapiekanka- (ZAH-pee-konga) is the Krawkow equivalent of street pizza. I had heard the talk about massive quantities, semi-unsanitary conditions and the rabid fan-base...I was in.

A slight sidebar...there's a lot of food here in Krakow. Sure, there's food everywhere, but when in Prague I noticed the number of bars per square block and in Krakow, it's the food. Pierogi's, gulosh, soups and sausage, but in Krakow, the hep street-walkers all swear by zapiekanka.

You will see it listed on almost every fast food vendors list, but ground-zero is a ten-sided round food shed in the Jewish Quarter on the south side of Old Town Krakow. The walk from the hostel was pleasant enough, Krakow planners had this novel idea about a circle of greenways to encircle "old town" offering trees, greens and more park benches than dupas to sit in them..a rarity for cities, I've found.

Anywho, after about a twenty-five minute walk, I was facing the ten-sided monster. Each facet of this building offers the same thing, but by different vendors; each with their own variations. Sure there's a technical explanation for what it is, and if you need that, look it up.

When I was asked to describe it, the bread itself reminded me of the business end of a cricket bat. Flat and inviting. The cricket analogy is good, because when it comes to toppings, it does appear as though someone throws vegetables and meat at the baking "cook" and whatever sticks to the bat goes in the oven. Theoretically there is no limit to the number of ingredients, but in a highly scientific analysis, the most I found was 8. So of course I ordered "Chicken from Hell" which contained the eight lethal ingredients.

The "chef" piles on the toppings, but instead of the cheese going on last, offering a sort of culinary "glue" to hold the entire mess together, the zapiekanka has the cheese at the bottom, with the toppings embedded into the cheese and bread. I had my doubts, but after a handful of samplings, they DO seem to stick together.

The "Chicken from Hell" was milder than the name would imply, but overall, Polish cooking tends towards the lard-based and not the savory inferno of other locales. It's a hefty meal, for a pittance: The "Chicken from Hell" retails at 10zt, or about \$2.60..and there are cheaper ones with less toppings or even half-sized versions, but what's the point of that?

And all of this eating is so insanely unnecessary. A friendly bit of advice offered by an over-served hostel-mate back in Prague alerted me to the wonders of Greg and Tom's Beer Hostel. For \$15 a night, you're given access to a modern bunkhouse with outlets by every bed, and food; breakfast AND dinner along with an hour of free beer. Now I know what you're thinking, and I did to, "Free food?" for almost 100 people...what? A big trough of baked beans garnished with stale bread. Not hardly. Seems Greg and Tom also own the restaurant on the first floor, so there's pizza, pasta, salads, fruit and a few meat courses..breakfast isn't shabby either, with eggs bacon, more meat, fruit and yogurts...and amazingly, small ham and cheese sandwiches wrapped up to take with you for your tours.

So there should be no earthly reason to go out and seek more food, but you do...I did, and don't think I'm not pondering a gastronomic "detox" once I clear Polish airspace. It's been a blizzard of calories, but I hear what you eat in Poland doesn't follow you once you leave these friendly confines.

I will miss my "Chicken from Hell" zapiekanka...I already do, so perhaps there's still a chance to get one...after the roadside kielbasa tonight....

### Street Gangs of Krakow

The internet is a wonderful thing. Used properly, you can get dragged all sorts of places. Case in point, with a little work I found out about "Kielbaski z Rozna Pod Hala Targowa"...and what is this?

It's an "old school" Pole who, along with his wife, fire-roasts arguably the finest kielbasa along-side his 1960 Blue Van along a derelict street in Krakow. This was too good to pass up, so I mapped it out on my phone and after nightfall, I made the trek. I followed the little blue line exactly, zigging when they say "zig", likewise with the "zagging". After a thirty minute walk I was there, but no "old school", no wood-fire, no kielbasa. Crestfallen at the loss of time, effort and kielbasa, I took a slow turn around corner, and almost under a viaduct, was the Blue Van. The smell of cooking meat, the roaring fire.....and about 50 people in line before me....I had found my Polish street food.

There was indeed a "hot box" fired up on the sidewalk next to the van, I had used these in Africa. You fire them up with real-wood charcoal, then stoke them with quartered tree logs. Legend has it that this wood is the secret to his success, but as they say, "Location, Location, Location". This spot is located at the hub of the southern Krakow beer and spirit intake establishments, and a 3am kielbasa does much to calm unsteady legs apparently.

There's no doubt that Slava, keeper of the flame, griller of gristle and fat, has followed the teachings of Peter Slotkowski, patron-saint of cased meats, who once opined, "gristle is good".

Standing in line for your turn at grilled glory, you can't help but notice what others are doing. My eye catches two thirty-somethings who are intently carving their kielbasa like a prosciutto ham, thinner and thinner. All the more amazing since the tools provided are a thin plastic knife and fork. I ask what the goal is, and find it's some sort of ongoing competition where the one with the most pieces wins. The guy I was watching managed to carve off almost 60 slices off a ten-inch sausage. They said the "modern-day" record is 157, but both guys contend, in broken English, that this was "fakey news offa the internet"...and there was also talk of him using "doctored utensils"...oh the drama on the streets of Hala Targowa

The line moved in a jerking fashion as eight get served at a time, the limit on Slava's skewers. The man is really a technician of the cased meats. He and his wife are clad in white lab coats, which gives the proceedings a more official "aire", quite different than slinging sausage at passing drunks.

As I stood there, I noticed that the farther away you were from Slava's fire, the more conversant we all were, but as the line shortened, those in front of the flame grew quiet, as if to hear the siren's song of this sizzling meat. Or perhaps it was in reverence to the grillmaster before them. Such was the power of a properly cooked sausage here in Krakow.

Slava works two skewers, in and out of the fire, flipping three to five times to keep things even. His left hand holds "current production" while the right holds "pre-heat". There was any number of rumors circulating in line about why they taste so good, but most were in Polish...was it the limited flipping? Was it the wood? Was it the "pre-heat"? Eventually I sidled up to the make-shift counter and had my go:

For eight zloty you get a kielbasa on a paper plate, a large roll and a dollop of spicy mustard. For another two , you get a funky glass bottle of soda. So for about \$2.70 you have a roadside "meal deal".

Slava was waving his skewers of meat like a great conductor of the kielbasa chorus....and yes, it was all magical. I noticed the adjacent eating stand was full, so I had the honor of eating off the short blue hood of the van and I think it added something to the ambiance. If not the additional 'spice' of flaking blue paint.

It is said that Slava goes thru six to seven-hundred kielbasas on a weekend night, serving the over-served young patrons in the surrounding pubs, and I can't doubt it. The soda was also fantastic and this required a little more research the next day. Seems the soda was a staple all over Poland during the 1960's and 70's, but like many things, then it faded from view. Slava, saw an opportunity and bought the recipe and the bottling plant. So when you're drinking a soda, there's no middleman..

All in all, a wonderful evening sampling a bit of "old school" Krakow. There are immeasurable joys of this traveling life, and finding places like the Blue Van are high on my list of memories. And I've come up with a way to further memorialize such things while traveling....it's all about the timing. I try to never "discover" anything on the last day in a country. While it shouldn't matter, I've found that the last day should be reserved for fond farewells to those things you've enjoyed during your stay. So tonight, after the last of the sunset pictures is taken on the main square, this photographer will be retracing his steps to an ancient Blue Van for an encore performance with Slava and his Kielbasa Chorus...