

CHEAP EATS

WHERE TO EAT FOR LESS THAN \$13 AN ENTREE

Smak-Tak! dishes up Polish fare amidst cozy ambience

By Kevin Pang
Tribune staff reporter

First impressions: You know it's got to be great when the storefront window proclaims, "It's just delicious." Inside, the restaurant resembles a ski lodge from Aspen—or as one friend described it, a crafts boutique in New England. Smak-Tak! (that's Polish for Taste-Yes!) on the city's Northwest Side feels small and homey, with wood panels and beams everywhere. A fireplace stands guard, and Polish newspapers are strewn. Discerning eyes will recognize that almost every plate, glass, chair and silverware came from Ikea. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

On the plate: For a place where no entree is more than \$10, the servings are just massive, thanks in part to the vegetable sides the chef chooses from: crisp sauerkraut, pineapple-carrot slaw (our favorite), cucumber salad and potatoes with dill. There are the Polish mainstays of pierogis, stuffed cabbage rolls, hunter stew and tripe soup. Also on the menu are cheeseburgers and chicken fingers—just like they make them in Warsaw.

At your service: On a Wednesday night, our party of three arrived to an empty restaurant. That only meant our server, Peter, was even more attentive. We were promptly offered hot tea, and soon after we placed our orders, the soups arrived in mere minutes. Then the food kept coming and coming.

Second helpings: The goulash soup is warm and hearty, perfect November food. The Hungarian-style pancake, with fork-tender pork chunks folded in a potato pancake that was crisp around the edges, could feed two people. The beef pierogis have nice, pillowy bite, the dough just thick enough to hold its shape against the generous filling. Babeczki, an upside down sponge cake topped with cream and



Tribune photos by Alex Garcia

The windows promise "delicious" food, and Smak-Tak! delivers on that promise with hefty portions of Polish food.

Smak-Tak!

5961 N. Elston Ave.
773-763-1123
Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. everyday
Credit cards: M, V
Delivery: Yes
Noise: Conversation friendly
Web site: www.smaktak.com
Other: Wheelchair accessible, smoking allowed, street parking

Nearby

Appetite booster: Right before warming yourself up with hearty Polish fare, there's nothing like getting into the cold-weather spirit with a hike through the Indian Road Woods Preserve. If there's snow on the ground, plan to do some sledding. At Central Avenue, one-half mile south of Caldwell Avenue.

Cultural feast: The Copernicus Foundation is the unofficial center of Polish culture in Chicago. Located at the historic Gateway Theater, the foundation houses a number of Polish variety shows, classes and musicals. 5216 W Lawrence Ave., 773-777-8898, www.copernicusfdn.org.

fruit, looks great and tastes better, and is a steal at \$1.50.

Take a pass: The pork loin with peach is wafer thin with little flavor, and comparatively small in size. The fruit-filled pierogis



Goulash stuffs this Hungarian-style pancake.

appetizers just weren't the right first course—we'll stick with the meat pierogis.

Thirst quenchers: Your standard choice of American sodas as well as the Jarritos brand of soft drinks from Mexico, and refreshing apple-mint and apple-peach drinks from Poland, called Tymbark. BYOB allowed.

Extras: Catering is available. Daily and monthly specials are quite a deal.

Price range: Soups and appetizers, \$2.99-\$6.99; main courses, \$4.99-\$9.99, desserts, \$1.50-\$5.99; drinks 99 cents-\$1.15.

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Ratings key: 4 forks, don't miss it; 3 forks, one of the best; 2 forks, very good; 1 fork, good

Reviews are based on anonymous visits by Tribune staff members; meals are paid for by the Tribune.