

Milk bars (bary mleczne), Poland

Kamil Hagermayer runs a chain of milk bars in Warsaw, Poland. He speaks to Anna Chworow, deputy director of Nourish Scotland.

A) What are milk bars?

K) Milk bars are a form of social assistance that the government provides to its citizens. It distributes funds directly in the form of subsidised meals.

A) And you are the owner of the whole chain of those bars in Warsaw?

K) Yes, I run these bars...I'm trying to recreate something similar to what we had during the Polish People's Republic, when this chain of milk bars was numerous. There were once around 30 branches in Warsaw and, I think, that slowly we are reaching this number.

A) We are in the Bar Prasowy. Can you tell us a little about the history of this bar?

K) Bar Prasowy is the oldest milk bar in Warsaw. It turned 70 last year... [it became] a symbol of the movements of urban activists who protested against the liquidation of the milk bar and against gentrification and depopulation of services in large city centres.

A) I've heard that you're not just an owner but sort of a guardian of the bar and of its history?

K) Yes, the 70 year old history of the bar is a history of people who have always carried out a mission of protecting this model and providing the local community with a chance to eat a meal that's not expensive. It's me at the moment, but I think that after me, there will be other entrepreneurs who will have a chance to take care of this place and take care of everyone who comes here.

A) That's the thing, I have a feeling that you're not only an owner but you're also a milk bar enthusiast.

K) Milk bars fulfil a combined catering and social function. It's interesting and I'm curious about it. Those relations and the way we co-create a community is as interesting as how to make good pierogi (dumplings).

A) - You're talking about this community - who are the customers of milk bars?

K) I think that it's a very interesting solution that milk bars are not limiting their offer to any group that would be indicated for special care. We don't have to identify ourselves or prove in any way that we need to use milk bars. All we have to do is come, sit down, order a meal... It's useful to everyone and doesn't stigmatise those who use it.

A) How many people dine at your place every day?

K) Everyday, we have several thousand guests. And we are very, very glad that they are coming back... We try to be attractive and offer tasty food that is appealing if you care about health and good meals.

A) I'm curious about the dishes that are served. Most milk bars I know are quite traditional. When I was coming here I saw Thai food on offer. Does the traditional nature of milk bars matter? Or are there innovations?

K) Innovations are definitely there. The menu of milk bars changes, but it will always fit into the concept of comfort food that is familiar. Food that was shaped by our upbringing, by our traditions, that were passed down by our mums or grandmothers. We want to go back to those flavours and we want them to be present here. It is wonderful that we're in Warsaw, where the level and variety of gastronomy is extraordinary. But we can always go back to simple. Milk bars are non-binding. You don't need to prepare in any special way for a visit to the milk bar. there's no dress code or booking. You just need to enter and you're already a guest. And we can have a good pierogi or a meat cutlet. It's a simple form of everyday life and everyday nutrition.

A) Yes, and familiarity with this cuisine is great. Yesterday, in one of those bars, I ate gołąbki for the first time in 20 years since I moved out of Poland. Honestly, I felt silly crying over a plate. It was a kind of emotion over, I don't know, familiarity, so there's something to it, isn't it?

K) Yes, the traditions of Polish cuisine reflect the diversity of residents in our country. This creates a richness of possibilities and tastes and makes Polish cuisine very versatile. There are around 250 ingredients that we use when creating the menu.

A) Which dishes are the most popular?

K) The most traditional dishes are the most popular. Tomato soup and pierogi are a hit. Kotlec shabowy (pork chop cutlet), the simplest one in the world, is also very popular. We're trying to diversify the menu, but our guests always go back to the dishes they know and associate with home. Gołąbki (cabbage roll) is in top ten too.

A) I've heard opinions that there is too much meat in milk bars and that they should be more vegetarian due to climate and health concerns. Do you think there's something to this?

K) Yes, it's interesting. Subsidies, allocated by the state, are solely for non-meat products, so that's vegetarian and plant-based products. This means entrepreneurs running milk bars have to design their menus so that more or less half of the dishes are vegetarian. Purchases must also be made with local farmers and producers. You cannot use processed food to produce subsidised dishes. The subsidies are the highest when meals are fresh and based on local products.

A) When we've been speaking to people about state-subsidised restaurants, many people say they should be directed to citizens in need. What is your position on that?

K) It's a natural way of thinking, but it's a simplification and exclusionary. Because, in that case, the government would be verifying the status of those people, and that's stigmatising. The most important thing for people who have a chance to get out of a crisis is when they feel comfortable and accepted and aren't just surrounded by others in a similar crisis. Then there might be more willpower to change the situation. The form of open milk bars works very well in Poland. It's a confirmation that it's a very good idea. Milk bars are found in the city centre and on main streets. They're not closed diners in basements or down alleyways.

A) We are also commonly asked the question: why should the government subsidise restaurants when people can cook at home? What are your thoughts?

K) Again, this is a simplification. Take energy efficiency as an example. Organised cooking using modern kitchen equipment is much more efficient. Milk bars are managed with effective energy usage and waste management. This is much more effective and less burdensome to the environment than singular small kitchens in flats and houses. We can do it better, and we can do it cheaper. Time efficiency is another point. Cooking is okay if it's done once a week or for a family. But you can spend an hour and a half shopping, preparing, cooking and cleaning up afterwards. We could spend this time on other things. Even if it's a good book or a walk outside. It will simply be better for everyone. Milk bars can do that. They've been doing it forever, and they're getting better and better.

A) Can you talk more about the public support and protests surrounding milk bars?

K) Milk bars have been receiving subsidies from at least the 1950's. And, at one point, the Ministry came up with a rule that spices were not longer going to be subsidised. This resulted in a rebellion and an absolute criticism of the idea. Members of the community and entrepreneurs actually sent unseasoned pierogi to the Ministry every day, so that they would eat them and see how bland they tasted without the spices. The idea was that ministerial stomachs and senses were probably the same as others.

A) It's really interesting for me to hear that people are not afraid to protest. I've seen other cases where people take to the street to protect milk bars.

K) Yes, milk bars have their great supporters. It settles somewhere in public consciousness that they are an element of city, culture and community. For this reason, they have staunch defenders.