

Vodka Touring in Warszawa

From Berlin, we headed out East on the quest to find what has shaped Poland as it is now through its national spirit: vodka

Na zdrowie!

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The air felt thicker and the sky seemed darker as we arrived in the Polish capital. Several skyscrapers touch the clouds and the wide boulevards bustle beneath. The tallest among them is the social-realist Palace of Culture and Science; a gift from Stalin after the city had been raised to the ground during World War Two.

Given the years of destruction the city endured, it is understandable that at first sight it perhaps isn't one of Europe's most stunning capitals. Having never visited before, we also arrive with a little apprehension ahead of our tour of the city's food and drink - what kind of craft alcohol scene might be alive in this post-Soviet metropolis?

After dropping our bags, we begin to explore the various neighbourhoods of this sprawling city. Over a weekend, we check out everything from the edgy, post-industrial district of Praga to the city's charming Old Town.

Along the way, we discover that craft beer has been on a steep rise since the early 2010s in Poland. Only last year, more than 50 microbreweries popped up; releasing more than 200 different styles. But we didn't only come to Warsaw to test the local brew. To understand Poland - its history, geography and even culture - there is only one drink that can truly teach you: Vodka!



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Our guides for the day; Eat Polska, offer to take us on a tour of local delicacies and promise to change our perception of this oft-misunderstood spirit forever. We meet Ola, our food tour guide, on a rainy mid-morning and soon forget about the weather with the help of our first shot of Wyborowa vodka and a warm bowl of fish soup. “Every Polish meal features soup at least once!”, she explains.

Heading down towards the river bank, we arrive to the rapidly gentrifying district of Powiśle. Home to an abundance of new-wave cafes and concept stores, as well a number of pioneering restaurants, including Aleksander Baron’s brainchild Solec 44.



With the aim of reviving traditional pre-war Polish food through his experiments in food fermentation and nose-to-tail cooking, he is making big waves here. The author of two cookbooks and a regular on Polish TV, he welcomes us warmly and pulls up a chair to join us for dinner, sharing his philosophy of food with us throughout.

Surrounded by hundreds of glass jars of fermenting fruits and vegetables, we feel strangely

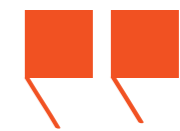
at home. “As a society, we are too ‘clean’; people are fooled by the best before date and throw away so much perfectly good food”, he tells us as he serves the appetisers.

Enjoying a plate of finely sliced and meticulously laid out root vegetables, some of which have been fermenting for 6 months or more, we’re really blown away. Other dishes on the menu in this Slow Food eatery include platters of Polish and Lithuanian cheeses, paired with local meats, homemade breads and, of course, fermented vegetables.

Over a bowl of Borsch of sour beetroot with smoked butter dumplings and parsley, we learn the full story of how this place came to be. Formerly a graffiti artist and sculptor, Aleksander first learned his craft in Edinburgh, where he worked his way up from pot-washer to head chef. After returning to his native Warsaw, he and his partner Katarzina, Solec 44’s sommelier, decided to try their hands at changing people’s perceptions of Polish cuisine.

Sharing some of her favourite bottles, Katarzina gives us the lowdown on the local beers, wines and distillates. “The

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country's wine industry has been in a renaissance, since the communist times. It is still very small - some of these wineries are producing just 5,000 bottles a year", she tells us.

Sharing a different Polish wine for each of Aleksander's dishes, she presents us with a bottle of this year's vintage that she has just received from one of her favourite small wineries, joining us in tasting it for the first time. "These producers are still developing their techniques, so you can taste the improvements and changes in their process every year - it's always exciting to receive the next vintage to compare with the last!"

Our final dish before a line-up of the pair's favourite vodkas is a veritable feast of foraged wild mushrooms from the Polish countryside. A combination of 'hedgehog' and boletus mushrooms are combined with stirred flour dumplings, onion and roasted beetroot to create the ultimate re-imagined Polish comfort food.

Before we leave, they present us some of Chopin Distillery's finest single-distilled vodkas, with the promise that these will change everything we think when we think of vodka. And, sure enough, as we discover the huge differences that each grain has to offer, we make our first discovery that vodka is not supposed to only be a flavourless spirit to mix with Coke - it can be a complex and beautiful drink in and of itself.

We bid farewell to Aleksander and Katerzina, heading off into the city to join the Eat Warsaw Vodka Tour.



Where to stay
Intercontinental Hotel
00-125, Emilii Plater 49

Winner of 'Poland's Leading Hotel' in the World Travel Awards, this five star hotel offers a perfectly central location from which to explore the city. Virtually next door to Central Station and overlooking the imposing Palace of Culture and Science, you can relax off your hangover from the hotel's high story spa, enjoying an unrivalled vista across the city.

The hotel is also home to Platter by Karol Okrasa, a restaurant where the famous Polish chef combines the flavours of traditional Polish products in surprising culinary creations. After dinner, enjoy a drink at their cosy +1 Bar, home to an impressive drinks list and cocktail menu.

Meeting our host for the night, Michal, he begins by explaining the history of vodka, which itself weaves a narrative through the whistory of Poland itself. Having been shaped and influenced by the vast changes to the country's borders that have taken place, a lesson in vodka first begins with a crash course in Poland's unique history.

Once a vast empire stretching from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Carpathian mountains in the south, the country's statehood has evolved so much over the past few hundred years that, at times, it has even ceased to exist. It was, of course, occupied by the Nazis and later became a part of the Soviet Union.

That period in particular had a huge influence on the country's vodka distilleries, along with all other kinds of manufacturing. Historically, each large town or city would have its own distillery, producing vodka to compete with the national brands that were available at the time. Under communism, these distilleries were commandeered to produce primarily for the national, State-owned brands, leading to a drastically more homogenised market.



After the fall of the Soviet union, many of these historic distilleries were either bought back by their original owners or sold to entrepreneurs, who have since resurrected their brands.

Michal also explains that there's a crucial cultural difference between how Poles and Westerners drink vodka. In the West, we tend to mix vodka with soft drinks or fruit juice, so the demand is for clear, flavourless spirit. Here, it is part of everyday custom to drink vodka straight, either as a shot or by sipping it, as an aperitif before a meal or along with a small snack at a bar.

Most of the marketing claims we hear from big brands in the West are that their vodkas have zero taste, thanks to being distilled so many times or being filtered through tons and tons of charcoal. Much in the same way that our tastes for more adventurous styles of beer have evolved, so too might our willingness to experience more interesting vodkas develop as we begin to see behind the marketing of the multinational brands.

Vodka is typically distilled from different grains, sometimes fruits and also, of course, from

potatoes. The big trend, at least for premium Polish vodkas, is to do such a great job of distilling your vodka the first time around, that you don't need to distill it a second and third time. This way, the vodka maintains so many more nuanced characteristics - sweet, floral notes and malty, full-bodied flavours.

We work our way through a huge diversity of vodkas - Michal's aim being to give us a sense of the huge scope of flavours that vodka can offer. At each stop, we also enjoy a small plate of typical Polish cuisine.

Discovering the difference in character between each different grain is the biggest lesson to learn about vodka; of course, what you brew to produce the alcohol for your vodka will also be the source of its flavour - whether that is rye, wheat or potatoes.

Grain vodkas tend to be cleaner, especially wheat vodkas, which are therefore easier to pair with food. Potato vodka, on the other hand, has a certain oily, buttery characteristic and a slight sweetness. New potato vodka in particular has the most complex flavour profile - floral on the nose, with a buttery mouthfeel.



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Afera, Szpitalna St.

The first stop on our grand Vodka Tour offered delicious home-cooked food in a low-key but welcoming atmosphere. Here we tried bigos, a traditional sauerkraut and meat dish paired with Wyborowa, a pure white rye vodka. Żołądkowa Gorzka follows, a flavourful herb infused vodka, enjoyed sip-by-sip.

Metr Nad Ziemią, Nowogrodzka St.

A tastefully decorated bar with an integrated bottle shop, displaying premium spirits from around the world along its walls. They sell a broad selection of wines, spirits and whiskies, served alongside contemporary Polish dishes. Here, we discover J.A. Baczewski, one of the leading brands of premium Polish vodka.



We later got a chance to catch up with the head of the company, to talk about his predictions for the future of Polish vodka; “Polish vodka will most likely evolve in 2 directions. One direction will be the total cost optimisation in order to deliver acceptable quality products at lowest possible price for the mass market. The second direction will be the pursuit of greatness in vodka - finding ways to manufacture the best possible product with the best possible taste and with a unique and authentic story to back it up. Of course we at Baczewski are only interested in the second one.”

Bibenda, Nowogrodzka St.

Bibenda bistro has a seasonally changing menu based on organic local ingredients. We try Vestal, a single distilled new potato vodka alongside fried ‘white’ sausage with lentils, pumpkin, carrot, and homemade mustard and a sour beetroot and cheese dish for the vegetarians. The complexity of the new potato vodka really split the table - some found it too much of a departure from their own imagination of vodka, while others enjoyed discovering additional layers of nuances with every sip.

Woda Ognista, Wilcza St.

Finally, we end our epic vodka tour at this underground cocktail bar. Home to Poland’s largest collection of vintage cocktail shakers, it has a ‘speakeasy’ vibe, with a premium cocktail list to match. Here, we learn all about the famous Żubrówka bison grass rye vodka, which they use in a variety of cocktails, as well as serving it straight.

Every bottle of Żubrówka is home to a single blade of bison grass, collected by hand from the primeval forests in Białowieża, which imparts flavours of cinnamon and vanilla. Refreshingly subtle and sweet, this vodka is typically mixed with apple juice, served with a garnish of lemon.



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KAROWA 31

Continuing our night, having departed from the official tour, we make our way to this elusive cocktail bar that we’ve already hear great things about. When you arrive, as we did, you shouldn’t let Karowa 31’s entrance fool you; the bar hides behind a sliding wall of VHS tapes!

Once inside, we meet Bram, the main bartender who opened the bar with Stanislaw after having met in Denmark. They thought there was a gap in the Warsaw bar scene; Karowa 31 offers something between small welcoming local bars that won’t go beyond G’n’Ts and the showy cocktail lounge that you only find in posh hotels.

“The idea was to establish a venue that’s laid-back but the quality and the selection of cocktails were outstanding”, Bram tells us. This resulted in a venue where the occasional suited-up french businessmen rubs shoulders with local skaters of Warsaw under the same roof. He explains that it is his mission to train their bartenders to ‘treat everyone like a lady’. With no dress-code or door policy, it has a fun atmosphere free of the pretentiousness usually associated with cocktail bars.

Karowa 31’s walls are loaded with history; it used to be the police headquarters under the communist regime; the building is protected by law. ‘It took us ages just to get the papers right; we couldn’t

drill a single hole for the first 4 months.’ Bram tells us as we are walking downstairs to the main bar. Karowa 31’s bartenders go under weekly training to keep their drinks top-notch, Bram also teaches how to easily make cocktails with a series of short videos on their social media in pursuit of bringing people closer to cocktail culture.

On weekends, they host a cream of european electronic DJs on the basement dancefloor, but in the main bar area, bartenders play their own music; the atmosphere changes depending who’s behind the bar. We enjoyed the best cocktails from our trip here at Karowa 31 and we can attest that, after a couple of drinks, you will definitely know the name of your bartender, so friendly is the service.



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