

## 6: The City Feeds Its Residents

The tradition of selling ready-to-eat meals in urban centers dates back to Roman times. In medieval cities, including Warsaw, many of the poorer residents—such as seasonal workers, widows, and small artisans—lived in single rooms without access to their own kitchens, leading to the development of ready-made food sales. Street food was also popular with travellers who visited the city during cyclical fairs and markets. Warm and cheap meals were sold at stationary stalls, located in high-traffic areas like city gates or around the market square. Vendors also used mobile carts, often equipped with ovens. A popular “fast food” in the Middle Ages was flatbreads made from flour and fat, stuffed with meat, fish, and sometimes vegetables. Sweet wafers and bagels were also popular. There were even shops where people could bring their own ingredients and order a takeaway flatbread. In large cities like London and Bristol, entire streets were dedicated to shops selling ready-made meals. In Bristol, street food vendors were even organized into their own guild, reflecting the high demand and popularity of such food, despite its not-so-great reputation.

In the early modern period, the popularity of street food among the poorer segments of society did not diminish. People purchased warm soups, primarily tripe, hot sausages, and doughnuts. Street food in Warsaw was mainly sold by women. The places where warm meals were sold were called “pot kitchens under the sun” or “inns beneath the clouds”. One such “outdoor canteen” was the space under King Sigismund’s Column. Scenes with a soup vendor at this iconic spot in the capital are depicted in late 18th-century drawings by Jan Piotr Norblin, which are displayed at the exhibition.

In cities and their vicinities, numerous inns operated, and since the end of the 15th century, they served not only as lodging for travellers but also as dining establishments and social meeting spots over alcohol. An example of this can be seen in the tavern run in the second half of the 17th century by Mr. Billiński, located in the basement of one of the tenement houses that lined Castle Square in Warsaw.

In the second half of the 19th century, due to the influx of people into Warsaw related to industrialization, the demand for quick meals—both street food and cheap eateries—such as small food stalls, taverns, small food shops, and from the 1860s,

affordable kitchens—rose significantly. Many residents couldn't afford to cook at home and often lacked the time, so they ate in the streets or in the cheapest venues. Street food remained popular, with dishes such as tripe stew in cups, pretzels, and doughnuts—some filled with savory fillings. Heated sausages were also in high demand. Several objects displayed at the exhibition illustrate this, such as Józef Rapacki's graphic titled Sausage Seller and a Legless Invalid, and a 19th-century shop sign depicting a man eating a warm sausage.

Tea rooms, dairy restaurants, and 'bavaries' (places where beer was served to accompany a small meal) were also popular.

The cheap food industry primarily developed in working-class districts such as Wola, Praga, and the Jewish quarter of the city. These areas saw the growth of affordable eateries like simple food stalls, taverns, and small bars, where one could drink alcohol and order a small dish.

Another form of accessible food came in the form of a "deli"—delicatessen shops where customers could get a reasonably priced meal prepared from the products sold in the store. Famous 'delis' included those run by Stepkowski, Bocquet, Sowiński and Szulc, Rozmanith, Bryliński, Lipkan, or Riedel. Each establishment specialized in different dishes, such as snacks, sausages with cabbage, tripe, herring, or sandwiches.

A drawing by Włodzimierz Bartoszewicz gives an idea of such an establishment, depicting the interior of the pre-war dining venue run by Antoni Salis. Operating from the 1920s until the outbreak of World War II, this bar was located in a tenement house at 4 Zgoda Street. It was one of Warsaw's first eateries where take-out dishes could also be ordered. Initially, it was a small deli offering ready-to-eat meals, including roasted poultry and venison, pâtés, and simple, popular Warsaw dishes such as tripe soup, various vegetable and fish salads, sausages, and frankfurters. As the business expanded, Salis added a second space to create a dining area for customers to enjoy their meals on-site. The menu expanded to include soups like broth or borscht with croquettes. The interior was furnished with small tables featuring marble tops and Thonet round stools, while the walls were lined with black-and-white tiles. The Salis bar became particularly popular among women, who both

bought ready-made dishes to save time and effort, and enjoyed light snacks which they consumed in the venue itself.

After World War II, as part of the planned economy, the authorities promoted the development of collective dining. The network of milk bars and fast-service eateries was expanded, along with support for workplace, school, preschool, and nursery cafeterias. These venues served a standardized menu featuring popular dishes such as pierogi, pancakes, tomato soup, cucumber soup, or broth, as well as potatoes with a cutlet and salad. In reference to this era, we present a painting by Józefa Wnukowa titled Milk Bar from 1954. The painting dates back to a time when the government endorsed the growth of collective gastronomy as a solution to the challenges women faced in balancing paid employment with traditional domestic responsibilities. The painting, while maintaining the prevailing Socialist Realist style of the time, also bears elements of post-impressionist colourism, which remained popular during that period.

In the 1980s, significant changes occurred in street food culture with the introduction of new street dishes like zapiekanki (grilled baguettes topped with mushrooms and cheese) and hot dogs.

However, the real revolution in eating out happened after 1989. Numerous eateries offering meals for every budget quickly emerged. Ethnic cuisines such as Italian, Vietnamese, and later Japanese, Thai, Mexican, and Turkish, became popular. During this time, vegetarian and later vegan restaurants also started appearing, with one of the oldest still in operation being “Vega”, located on Solidarności Avenue and operating since 1992. Today, Warsaw has the most meat-free eateries in the entire European Union. A trend developed where dining out became part of city life. Moreover, ready-to-eat meals and companies specializing in preparing dishes, often providing entire daily menus tailored to individual needs, became available.