

# Warsaw packed

The popular Martini Club throws some glitz on the stereotypical old-man Polish bar.

By **Gretchen Kalwinski**

**POLAND**



**POLE POSITION** Martini Club's cold vodka and hot bartenders may make you a little lightheaded.

The Polish party spot **Martini Club** (4933 N Milwaukee Ave, 773-202-9444) nestles in the blue collar 'hood of Jefferson Park, but it's attempting to draw an upscale, clubby crowd. Exhibit A: swank decor like gilded mirrors, a translucent bar lit up underneath by red lights, a DJ area near the front window, glowing red candles, leather booths, exposed brick, disco balls and laser lights. In a city that abounds with Polish shot-and-beer joints, this bar reaches out to those whose names may not end in *ski* while still retaining its Polish roots.

As is the custom for any Polish bar, the place is stocked with impossibly good-looking female bartenders (who understand just enough English to chat with non-

Poles). Before 9pm, the joint's littered with men buying drinks and watching the bartenders and whatever game is on the TVs; the mood is mellow, and occasionally someone uses the free Wi-Fi to type on his laptop.

Poles are a naturally suspicious people—hey, their country has been invaded a *lot*—so non-Poles may receive a standoffish reception. But once a drink is ordered and cash is out on the bar, bartenders get chatty and smilingly suggest vodka drinks from their menu. “You been here before?” one minidress-wearing bartender asks a man sporting an outfit and a baseball cap in the Polish flag colors of white and red. “You want me to tell you best drinks on menu?” He does.

Beer drinkers go for bottles of light, crisp Zywiec (ZHIV-yetz), or Okocim (oh-KO-chim) on draft, which tastes “cleaner and sharper” than the bottled stuff, according to one friendly old man who downs the traditional vodka shot before taking a sip of his beer. Another shot option: the gold-colored Krupnik (\$3), a honey-lemon vodka infused with herbs. This stuff burns as it travels down the pipes, but many Polish bartenders (and grandmothers) tout it as a cold remedy; “It’ll kill whatever germs you’ve got,” says Mark (Marek in Polish), a first-generation Pole in his fifties whose parents met in a post-WWII relocation camp. He speaks Polish, “but not as well as I used to,” he says.

After a few drinks, Marek

## Slow burn

Pick up our two favorite Polish vodkas.

**Zubrowka** (jooV-BROOV-ka), pictured, is an herby-tasting vodka infused with bison grass grown in Poland's Biaowie forest; there's a blade of it in each bottle, which gives the stuff a pleasing greenish-yellow color. Poles like to drink it with apple juice or cider. Get it for \$4 per glass at **My Place on Milwaukee** (3394 N Milwaukee Ave, 773-286-4482).

For straight-up great-tasting vodka, go for the sharp, clean, no-aftertaste

**Wyborowa** (veh-bo-ROW-va). It holds its own against Belvedere and Ketel One—but costs substantially less. Grab a 750ml bottle for \$12.99 at **Foremost Liquors** (2300 N Milwaukee Ave, 773-278-9420). —GK



loosens up enough to try some Polish on the bartender, so he says “thank you,” “*Dziękuję*” (jane-KOO-yeh), and clinks glasses with his friend while reciting the traditional Polish toast, “*Na zdrowie*” (nah-STROH-vyeh), which means “to your health.”

Soon there are signs the boisterous birthday party in the back booths threatens to take over the bar—the place is suddenly full of balloons, the TVs change from sports to European music videos and laser lights flash around the bar. “I’m out of here,” Marek says, laughing, and though the bartenders try to press another drink on him, he leaves to make more room for the young Poles, who are toasting, “*Sto lat!*” (“100 years”), to the birthday girl.

## SIMILAR SPOTS

**Zakopane** (1734 W Division St, 773-486-1559). The same old men have been drinking Polish beer and mid-range vodkas here since time began. Only now there's an actual bathroom door instead of a sheet, an improvement made sometime in the late '90s.

**Cavaller Inn** (735 Gostlin St, Hammond, IN, 219-933-9314). If you're hitting traffic on the way back from Michiana, exit I-90 for reliable Polish drinks—Zywiec (beer), Zubrowka (bison-grass vodka) and jezynowka (blackberry brandy). Order some pierogi to soak up the booze before heading home.

**Karolinka Club** (6102 S Central Ave, 773-735-0818). This polka joint serves Tyskie, a popular lager often sweetened with raspberry or strawberry syrup.

**Accent Café** (700 N River Rd, Mount Prospect, 847-298-2233). On weekends, young Poles here drink the Polish flag shot—cherry juice with vodka. —GK