

WeekendTravel

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Pastry making in Poznań

Poznań's candy-coloured buildings mirror the sweetness of its most treasured asset, St Martin's Croissants

There are three things Poznań is famous for: potatoes, goats and croissants. My taxi driver, who remained silent for the majority of the 20-minute journey from the airport, suddenly becomes animated as we near my hotel. It's approaching lunchtime, so the subject of food may be contributing to this unexpected giddiness.

"Everyone here loves potatoes," he continues, skilfully navigating the Old Town's narrow yet busy streets. "Not just in our stomachs, but also in our hearts."

Being Irish makes me an expert on potatoes, and since they're a ubiquitous part of my life, I'm eager to try something different during my stay in this Poland's fifth-largest city, a three-hour drive east of Berlin. (The presence of Germans here over the centuries has resulted in a significant influence of Deutsch on the local dialect.)

I tell the driver that I'm booked into a baking class during my stay, where I'm due to learn about one of the



Food for thought: main, St Martin's Croissants in Poznań and (above) Domhnall with Krzysztof Szafran at the Poznan Croissant Museum

other items on his list, St Martin's Croissants.

"The Feast of St Martin is November 11 — it's a public holiday with a parade," he reveals, adding that over a million croissants are devoured on that day alone. "But we also eat them all year round."

"Are they better than the French variety?"

His raised eyebrow reveals all I need to know.

Moments later, we alight from the vehicle, and after retrieving my suitcase, he leans in close and references the third and final item on his list.

"If you like goats," he whispers, "be in front of the Town Hall at 12 or three o'clock."

I suddenly feel as if we're spies from the World Wars. With that, the taxi driver — if that's really what he is — disappears down the street.

Later during my visit, I sit among 40-odd visitors from countries as diverse as the United States, England, the Netherlands and China to learn about the baking process of St Martin's Croissant.

Known as rogal świętomarciński in Polish, this local speciality holds Protected Geographical Indication status from the EU, meaning only certified bakeries in Poznań are permitted to produce and sell it under this name. There are currently 84 approved bakers in the region, and each piece can cost between 15 and 20 zloty (£3 – £4).

Our instructor, the witty Krzysztof Szafran, tells us that they're a "huge part of local culture." While the normal baking process typically takes seven hours, he's offering us an abridged — and hilarious — version.

The similarities between Poland and Ireland extend beyond a shared love of potatoes to include an admiration for Catholic saints, so I nod knowingly as he explains that St Martin of Tours was a fourth-century Roman soldier. While in France one winter, he encountered a shivering beggar and, after using a sword to cut his cloak, gave half to the destitute man. Later, Jesus appeared to Martin in a dream, insisting that He was the beggar, prompting the soldier to abandon his military career for a life of religion.

But I wonder, how did a French saint become associated with Polish pastries? As if reading my mind, Krzysztof begins his explanation.

"In the late 19th century, a local baker, Józef Melzer, had a vision of St Martin on top of a horse that had lost its golden shoe. The next day, Józef stepped on something, and when he looked down, it was a horseshoe. He immediately knew what to do: make pastries shaped like horseshoes!"

Krzysztof adds that there's an unfair stereotype about people from Poznań.

"Some say we are cheap and greedy, but that's clearly not true because the baker gave the first half of the croissant to the poor for free." With a wink, he adds, "The second half, he sold to the rich and, of course, charged them twice the price."

Speaking of money, the best people to make the pastries are children, "because we don't have to pay them!" he teases, dragging a delighted girl from the audience. With the addition of a tall, billowing baker's hat, someone behind me comments that she looks like a queen.

Incidentally, this isn't the only time royal figures will be discussed in the city this year. Celebrations are in full swing to mark the 1000th anniversary of Boleslaw the Brave's coronation as the first King of Poland. The event, which likely took place in the cathedral in Ostrów Tumski, the oldest part of Poznań, was a pivotal moment in the country's history, marking the beginning of Polish statehood. For this reason, the late Pope John Paul II declared Ostrów Tumski was "where Poland began".

Despite wearing a regal, crisp white hat, the girl isn't actually a monarch (as far as I know), but she exemplifies the strength of Boleslaw the Brave while kneading the pre-prepared dough. Later in the process, margarine is added.

"Margarine was initially used because it was cheaper," Krzysztof explains, "but then the various bakers discovered that it doesn't burn out in the oven as quickly as butter."

As the girl continues pummeling the dough ("Think



Making St Martin's Croissants in the Croissant Museum

of someone you hate!" Krzysztof encourages), the group learns that it must be folded four times. Then, after some tomfoolery about rolling, cutting and shaping the pastry, he discusses the delicacy's unique selling point: the filling, which Krzysztof claims is "the most important part". "White poppy seeds are key, then there are nuts like peanuts or almond aroma, raisins and candied fruit. The top of the croissant is decorated with icing and more nuts."

He raises aloft "one that we made earlier" and asks, "Does it scream, 'eat me'?" When the crowd with their salivating mouths nods, Krzysztof grimaces. "Well, it shouldn't — it's a pastry and pastries don't scream." I laugh heartily while others groan.

The final stage involves ensuring that the croissants weigh between 150 and 250 grams. If it's less or more, Krzysztof reveals, you can't use St Martin's name.

Our attention suddenly drifts outside and onto the magnificent, candy-coloured Old Market Square, the third-biggest in the country after those found in Kraków and Wrocław, and undoubtedly one of the prettiest in Central Europe. There, a crowd is gathering beneath the ornate, Renaissance Town Hall, once the seat of local government but now a museum.

Factbox

■ Domhnall was a guest of Poznań Tourism Organisation (visitpoznan.pl).

■ For further information on the Poznań Croissant Museum, visit (rogalowemuzeum.pl). The 11 o'clock and 2 o'clock demonstrations include viewings of the goat show.

■ He stayed in the well-priced and centrally located Hotel Kolegiacki (hotelkolegiacki.pl).

■ Dining suggestions include the excellent Michelin-recommended Posto (postopoznan.pl) and Zen On (facebook.com/ZenOnRestaurant).

Others tried-and-tested restaurants include Republika Róż (republikaroz.pl), Dynx (dynxrestauracja.pl), Brovaria (brovaria.pl) and Pyra Bar (pyrabar.pl).

Suddenly, a bugle horn sounds as a duo of mechanical goats emerge from the tower, just as my taxi driver promised, and they begin butting heads. Surreptitiously using my phone like a mischievous schoolchild, I discover online that another food-maker was at the root of Poznań's other main attraction.

To mark the commissioning of the tower clock, legend states that a cook named Pietrek was tasked with preparing a banquet, but after becoming distracted, the meat fell into the fire.

In a panic, Pietrek kidnapped two unsuspecting goats from a nearby meadow, taking them to the Town Hall, where they eventually escaped. Later, the animals were spotted tussling in the tower, amusing onlookers. In tribute, two mechanical goats were added to the clock's design, and, centuries later, they continue to be activated twice daily.

Whether this account is merely folklore remains uncertain, but the longer I stay in Poznań, the more I realise how resourceful the locals are at making the best of bad situations.

Take this square below, along with its surroundings. In early 1945, during the final months of WWII, the majority of the Old City was destroyed when bombs and shells rained down on the historic centre, reducing it to a pile of rubble.

As a testament to their grit and dedication to their heritage, locals reconstructed the buildings' façades, including the rows of merchants' houses. I can only imagine the effort needed to complete this task successfully; builders would surely require instruments larger than the rolling pin and cooking implements Krzysztof has been waving in front of us all afternoon during his demonstration.

"How many calories are in a full croissant?" someone asks him as we queue to receive our slice.

"About 1,200," he replies.

I'm immediately reminded of my earlier visit to the Zamek Culture Centre, the former imperial castle of Wilhelm II. Sitting amongst the exhibitions and ornate rooms is the Kaiser's throne. The seat is noticeably wide, which, apparently, allowed room for God.

Now, as I wolf down Poznań's delicious delicacy, I wonder if the real reason for the additional space was to accommodate bulging bellies, surely the consequence of devouring St Martin's Croissants daily.

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