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The Busy Bee was the sweetest restaurant in Chicago. Until 1998, the Polish-American diner under the L tracks at 1546 N. Damen was a fixture of the Northwest Side. Harold Washington campaigned there; one-armed piano player Eddie Balchowsky told two-fisted stories about his buddy Nelson Algren there. The Busy Bee was a diamond ring that united Damen, Milwaukee and North avenues.

How do you explain love? The Busy Bee was like that, an inexplicable urge you trusted for its lasting glories and understood for its momentary shortcomings. Owner Sophie Madej, who bought the Busy Bee in 1965, retired at age 70 in 1998 and sold the restaurant. The space recently was remodeled and reopened as the Blue Line Club Car restaurant and bar.

They do not serve pierogi. Yet.

Former Chicago chef Michael J. Baruch recently published *The New Polish Cuisine*, an impressive cookbook on the art of Polish cooking. Baruch was born and reared in Norwood Park. "My father Marion was a Polish immigration lawyer in Chicago, and Sophie was a friend of our family," Baruch says from his home in San Diego, Calif. "I remember going there with my grandfather, who owned a store on Milwaukee Avenue, where he made smelt nuts by hand. She had a party for Adlai Stevenson. Her cooking was always an inspiration to me as a young chef working in Chicago. I hope that my recipes and book will live up to her high standards."

I recently invited Sophie back to her old stomping grounds. I brought along a copy of *The New Polish Cuisine*. Sophie had not been back to 1546 N. Damen since the restaurant's final day on June 28, 1998. Sophie took an L train with her son Hank from her Northwest Side home to Wicker Park. She walked into the Blue Line. Her eyes were wide open. And she cried. She could not articulate her thoughts. How do you explain love?

"I spent all my life here," Sophie says while sitting in a dark booth near a jukebox that features Nirvana and Fatboy Slim. "Now I'm relaxing. I visit with my four great-grandchildren. We eat out a lot." Sophie can be found having breakfast at Mr. K's on North Harlem Avenue, or she meets friends for dinner at Andrew's Open Pit on Dempster Street in Park Ridge.

The Matriarch of Wicker Park looks out at Damen Avenue, aka Sophie Madej Street, and admits, "I hardly cook anymore. I'm not used to cooking for three or four persons. I used to cook big. I miss the neighborhood. I don't like coming back here. It's too emotional."

Blue Line owner John Halle plans to honor Sophie and the Busy Bee with a dish on his still-evolving menu. Halle is the owner of the Salt and Pepper diners in Lincoln Park and Wrigleyville. He opened the Blue Line in October. The 125-seat restaurant currently serves only dinner, but Halle plans to expand to brunch and lunch.

"When I told Sophie I was doing brunch, she was interested in just coming here and seating people," says Halle, a Chicago native. "To tell you the truth, I was scared to take this space. I turned it down a couple of times. Those are big shoes to fill. But when Sophie came here, she stayed and ate. While she was eating she said, 'You're doing it right. Big portions. The food is cheap.' Try the beef tenderloin with asparagus, spinach garlic mashed potatoes and house salad, \$14.95. We all enjoyed her visit immensely."

And Sophie says, "When they open up for lunch, I will bring all the girls waitresses from the Busy Bee."

While Sophie occasionally regrets selling the Busy Bee, her son Bob Madej suggests her retirement was a blessing in disguise. Sophie underwent a triple bypass operation six months after she sold the restaurant. "Her selling was the best thing," says Bob, a manager for Superior Coffee. "If she still would have been here, we probably would have buried her. It took her almost a year to get her strength and energy back. Now she looks like she's 55."

Sophie is 75, and she can attribute her rich life to good Polish cooking. "At the Busy Bee I cooked like I did at home," she says. "I cooked out of my own head from what my mother used to do. I used quality products from scratch. I worked in a packing house Rose Packing at the Back of the Yards. It was nothing to lift 100 pounds of potatoes from a truck. But I got sick and had to quit. In the meantime, the Busy Bee restaurant went up for sale. We took a loan on the building and bought the restaurant.

"I knew nothing about cooking. During the first year I remember the butcher brought in half a pound of meat. He told me to take it apart. I'm standing there with a knife and I'm crying. I didn't know which end to pull on."

The legendary Busy Bee meat, cheese and potato pierogi were handmade. During the Christmas season, the restaurant sold 1,000 pierogi a week. The dough was the key factor. Sophie kneaded the dough, striking the right balance of flour, eggs and water. This ensured that the dough would enclose the filling and wouldn't break open while being boiled.

Baruch calls the Busy Bee "a very historical restaurant." He says, "The greatest lesson I learned from the Busy Bee was Polish peasant hospitality serving gourmet fare. I know both of the Mayor Daleys ate there. Great chefs snuck in there. I was a

sous chef at Le Francais, Jovan and Cafe Provencal, and I've seen a lot of places close. It wasn't until the Busy Bee closed that I saw people cry. It was a sad thing for people who lived in the area and for Chicago in general. But you get old and life goes on."

Sophie was enamored with the concepts presented in *The New Polish Cuisine*. For example, Baruch writes most people don't realize that Poles were mostly vegetarians, which was due to the fact they have so many religious holidays where fasting is required. In truth, the only fasting at the Busy Bee was how quick you could eat the meatloaf and stuffed green peppers before someone nudged you off your diner stool.

Sophie ran the Busy Bee as a way to provide for her family. She has four children between the ages of 48 and 54. She met her husband, Henry, in 1946 in Germany after she was moved from Poland under the Nazis' forced labor laws. They divorced in 1985.

The restaurant was not an investment endeavor, and Sophie never opted to open Busy Bee II and Busy Bee Three. Until regentrification consumed Wicker Park in the 1990s, the neighborhood consisted of transient hotels, apartment buildings and factories. The Busy Bee was the neighborhood kitchen. The restaurant even sponsored a bowling team on Damen Avenue.

Baruch says, "I'll never forget the first time I went there and saw what they called 'millionaires' row,' which was a horseshoe of regulars that went around the diner. It was a lot of old geezers, old Polish guys whose wives had passed on. Basically Sophie took care of them. That was her extended family."

Sophie adds, "If the kids wanted to see me on Christmas Eve, they had to come to the restaurant. We had Easter dinner at the restaurant. We were open 365 days a year. The Busy Bee was a way of life."

And the beloved Busy Bee remains a way of life. You can read it between the lines of *The New Polish Cuisine*; you can feel it in the air of the new Blue Line Club Car bar and restaurant.

This great homemade Polish soup was served every third Sunday at the Busy Bee. "We used to sell 30 gallons on a Sunday," says Sophie Madej, former owner and chef.

She always poured her soup over a hard-boiled egg in the soup bowl. The spinach soup was my favorite. A large bowl of soup with buttered rye bread on the side could keep you going until Tuesday night.

This recipe makes about 6 cups:

Bring 10 to 12 cups of water to a boil in a pot.

Add 1 whole medium onion, 1 or 2 carrots, a stalk of celery, half of the white part of a leek (optional) and 2 washed neck or beef bones. Bring all to boil for about 20 minutes, then remove the bones and vegetables.

To the pot, add 8 ounces of washed and chopped spinach, and a teaspoon of vinegar (or lemon juice). Boil 20 minutes. Throw 1/4 teaspoon of pepper into the pot, along with 2 tablespoons of Maggi seasoning or bouillon. Keep it boiling for another 15 minutes until the spinach becomes soup.

In a separate bowl, mix 1/2 cup of half-and-half with 3 tablespoons of flour (to cut calories, Sophie says you can use a slurry of water and cornstarch). Beat flour until there are no lumps. Pour this mixture slowly into soup, mixing while pouring. Add 4 tablespoons of lemon juice, or to taste. "Everything is to taste," says Sophie. Bring soup to a boil for 10 to 15 minutes.

Now, reduce the heat to a simmer and, in tribute to Sophie, briskly stir in 4 (maybe even 5!) tablespoons of sour cream, small amounts at a time. Continue cooking for 5 to 10 minutes.

For taste, add 1/2 teaspoon of minced garlic, salt and more lemon, as needed.

To serve, slice a hard-boiled egg, place it in a soup bowl and pour the soup over it.

Outside of chicken noodle soup, Sophie made all the Busy Bee soups with a flour base for texture. She adds, "The longer you cook it, the better it will taste."