Zapiekanka
Photo: Thinkstock

milk bars are of "grumpy old ladies" and "not particularly clean cutlery".

While the venues might have moved on a bit from the cutlery-chained-to-the-table-days, the food is still often served on disposable plastic plates; the expectation being that once you have finished eating, you clear up and out.

"Milk bars are not a restaurant experience as we have come expect in the West," Bill says. "It's not the sort of place where you might linger, it's more, eat and leave."

As Poland's food culture becomes increasingly sophisticated and international, therefore, such venues are emptying out. Mediterranean and Asian cuisine are increasingly popular, and in Polish cities you will now find the same diversity of food as in the UK. However, as Poles increasingly look elsewhere for their dining experiences, there is another group being drawn to the nation's milk bars: the growing number of tourists visiting the country. For those looking for an alternative to the familiar fare they can find in any international city, for something authentic, traditional, and with an echo of Poland's history, the appeal is obvious.

The unusual name of milk bars dates back to their beginnings, when visitors would be served tall glasses of milk, as part of a government initiative to get Poles drinking more of it. Though these days have passed, the name still has relevance. The fare on offer is dominated by milky soups, creamy sauces, pancakes and dumplings topped with cheese, all products of Poland's significant surplus of dairy produce.

One guidebook described a visit to a milk bar as "practically a cultural attraction". One of the country's most talked-about is in Krakow and is catering for the growing number of visitors to the city, as well as loyal locals. Milk Bar Tomasza is owned by an Irish immigrant, Thomas Naughton, who bought it at a public auction after the previous operation had gone bankrupt. Naughton now sees an average of 500 customers a day.

"We get a lot of tourists coming through," he says. "Everything has become so commercialised. People want to see the old, they want to see something authentic."

Their growing popularity among visitors is down to the 'Instagrammification' of travelling, he says. "People want to get a picture of their pierogi (dumplings). They want to check-in on Facebook. They want to show everyone where they've been rather than just experience it."

Naughton describes milk bars as quite an informal experience: people sit at communal tables with strangers, the food has the feel of being lovingly home-cooked. "It's the sort of place where you can eat with your fingers," he says. "It's the kind of place where you know all the staff."

Tomasza has innovated more than most milk bars and offers a hybrid menu of typical Polish food, and some English and Irish staples, too. Pierogi feature alongside cheese omelettes and scrambled eggs on toast. As head chef he says he has radically improved the quality of the food.

"Milk bars haven't changed a great deal since the 1950s. They've just not evolved; they're an institute – but nobody's been particularly interested in the cooking. I've been trying to change that."

Naughton has found getting friendly staff has also been a little tricky. Customer service in Poland – especially in its milk bars – often errs on the frosty, if it exists at all; but Naughton has tried to create a warmer atmosphere, encouraging customers to sit with strangers, to get them talking.

The growing popularity of milk bars among visitors to Poland mirrors a wider interest in the country's cuisine from abroad, according to Ren Behan, a British food writer of Polish descent. Behan wrote her cookbook *Wild Honey and Rye* to capitalise on this and to introduce more modern takes on Polish classics.

"There is much to be discovered about Polish food and I think people are starting to see that it can be much lighter and healthier than they might have expected, too."

Behan cites 'online food tourism' as making everyone a little more adventurous, a little more eager to sample something they might ordinarily not be exposed to – and Polish food culture is also, in turn, being influenced by this, with much innovation going on in the country.

"The food scene in Poland is changing very rapidly," she says. "And is now very vibrant and modern, with high quality Polish ingredients being used in new and exciting ways. The Poles also took to food blogging and things such as food festivals, food tours and supper clubs are hugely popular, also."

Lukasz Mazurek is co-owner of Platzki: a contemporary Polish restaurant in Manchester, serving modernised takes on many a milk bar staple. Mazurek describes milk bars as being very much tied to tradition: the menu hasn't changed, the decor remains the same. Though he admits visiting one every time he returns to Poland, finding comfort in the cosy sameness of it.

"Food is changing in Poland," Mazurek says. "There's different ingredients, different flavours, new herbs and spices. But milk bars, well, they stay the same."

Whether such steadfast refusal to shift with the times will see off the milk bar, or help them find a niche to survive, remains to be seen.

HOW NOTHING CAME OUT OF SOMETHING

PETER TRUDGILL explains how some words have come to mean the opposite of their roots

If someone thanks you for something in Catalan, the standard response is *de res*, literally 'of nothing'. This may remind some people of Spanish and Portuguese, where the equivalent response would be *de nada*, with *nada* again meaning 'nothing'.

At first sight, the history of *res*, the Catalan word for 'nothing', seems very odd. Catalan, like the other Romance languages, is historically derived from the Late Spoken Latin of the Roman Empire; and Catalan *res* comes from Latin *res* which meant precisely the opposite of 'nothing', namely 'thing'.

But notice that exactly the same thing has also happened in Occitan, the language of southern France, where the word for 'nothing' is also *res*. And in French itself 'nothing' is *rien*, which too derives from Latin *res*, except in this case the word is derived from *rem*, which was the accusative or object-case form of *res* in Latin. The same is true of the Arpitan (Franco-Provencal) language of western Switzerland, eastern France, and northwestern Italy, where 'nothing' is *ren*.

These are not the only known cases of a word changing its meaning from 'thing' to 'nothing'. In the Cretan variety of Modern Greek, 'nothing' is *prama*. This comes from *pragma*, which meant 'thing' in Ancient Greek and still has the same meaning in the modern language. *Pragma* was derived from the Ancient Greek verb *prattein* 'to do'. In Modern Greek *pragmatika* means 'really', and this is obviously the origin of our English words *pragmatism* and *pragmatic*.

All of these forms meaning 'nothing' – *res*, *rien*, *ren*, *prama* – can also translate into English as 'anything' in certain grammatical contexts. The sentence 'Didn't you see anything?' in French can be *Tu n'as rien vu?*, and in Catalan *No has vist res?* In Crete, a conversation with someone standing on the shore with a fishing line in their hand might go *Prama? – Prama!* 'Anything? – Nothing!'

The intriguing question is, though: how did ancient words meaning 'thing' end up coming to mean 'nothing' in some modern languages? English nothing comes from Old English *nan* 'not one' plus thing, which does make sense – there is no surprise about not one thing meaning 'nothing'. Norwegian *ingenting* 'nothing' is also literally 'no-thing'. But why did *res* and *pragma* end up meaning 'nothing'?

The explanation is that forms like *rien* were so often used in negative contexts, in sentences of the type *Je ne veux rien* 'I don't want (a) thing', that they gradually acquired negative meanings themselves: 'I don't want a thing' does mean the same as 'I want nothing'. Experts say that *rien* was so frequently used in combination with the negative word *ne*, 'not', that the negative meaning gradually transferred from the one form to the other, to the extent that the *ne* could be omitted. So while it is now still perfectly possible in modern French to say *Je ne veux rien*, you can also just say *Je veux rien*.

And there are several other cases of this kind of negative-meaning transfer. French *personne* means 'nobody': *Qui est venu? Personne!* translates as 'Who came? Nobody!' And *jamais*, 'never', used to mean 'always', from Latin *iam magis* 'still more'. The Italian word *mai*, 'never', also comes from Latin *magis*, 'more' – so 'more' has turned into its opposite 'no more'.

In Classical Latin, the word *res*, which modern *rien*, *ren* and *res* descend from, could also mean 'affair, matter': the Latin expression *in medias res*, sometimes used by people writing in English, means 'into the middle of things'. And our word *republic* comes from the Latin *res publica*, 'public affair'. Latin *res* was related to the Sanskrit word *rayi*, 'property, goods'; and these two words both came from the ancient Indo-European root *rehis*, signifying 'wealth'.

There is probably no moral to be drawn from this, but it is fascinating to observe that a word which six thousand years ago meant 'wealth' now means 'nothing'.

PERSON

Person comes from the Latin word *persona*, which referred to a character in a drama and had originally meant 'mask' – Roman actors typically wore masks. It is possible that *persona* came from Latin *per-sonare* 'to sound through', since the mask was something which the actors had to speak through.