



Back to Pataki: The best of times at Wvrst

Pataki: The best of times at Wvrst

July 29, 2011

Amy Pataki

Wvrst

★★★★ (out of 4)

Address: 609 King St. W. (at Portland St.), 416-703-7775, wvrst.com

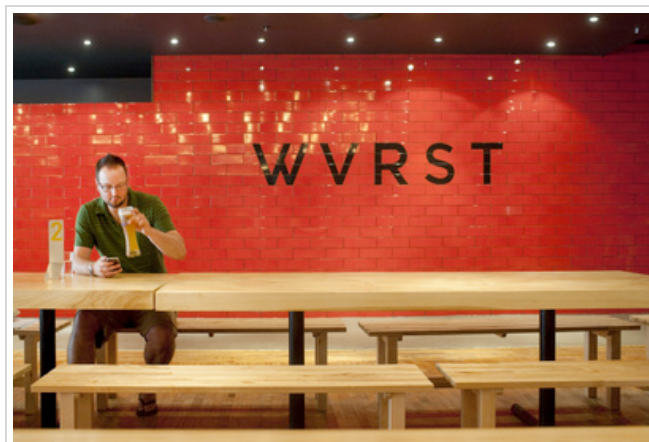
Chef: Jason Costatini

Hours: Monday to Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Thursday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 1 a.m.

Reservations: No

Wheelchair access: No

Price: Dinner for two with beer, tax and tip: \$40



Wvrst's stripped-down decor includes communal tables, wooden benches and a striking red-tiled wall.

Keith Beaty/Toronto Star

You do the math: a sausage at the [Wvrst](#) beer garden costs three times more than a street dog, but is 10 times better.

Welcome to the Entertainment District's latest success story. The name, pronounced "verst," is imperfectly German, but the concept is genius.

It's simple, with just four things on the menu, five if you count the bread: beer, fresh sausages, French fries and dipping sauces.

It's unpretentious, with counter service and communal tables. And it's fun. Plus the beer list is excellent. (See Josh Rubin's review of the suds on this page.)

Owner Aldo Lanzillotta, 36, opened Wvrst on June 1 in the former Conviction. The Italo-Canadian chef (ex-Teatro, KiWe) says opening a postmodern German beer garden came naturally to him.

"My father lived in Munich after World War II and a lot trickled down to me," he says.

Wvrst, though, is a beer garden as seen in *Wallpaper** magazine. It is not kitschy, like the late Amadeus Bavarian Bierstube on Richmond St. W. Red-tiled walls and a bouncy ska soundtrack warm the utilitarian space.

There are other departures from the norm. There are no Oktoberfest bands (but check back Sept. 17 to Oct. 3). There are no buxom blondes in dirndls slinging mugs of Paulaner. Instead, hipster dudes run the food and beer out.

A meal at Wvrst begins at the refrigerated counter, where fresh sausages curl on their respective trays. The 17 types cover most continents, and include a tofu kielbasa (\$7) that is a crime against charcuterie.

Order your sausage on a bun or as a currywurst, Germany's beloved fast food: sliced sausage doused with homemade curry ketchup.

There are toppings, should you desire, as well as chunky fries cooked two ways: in oil or in duck fat. Yup, Wvrst fills a fryer with duck fat. The dipping sauces are for the fries.

Five sausage makers, two in Quebec and three in Ontario, supply their wares. (Lanzillotta is planning to sell some at fine-food stores.)

Boerwoers (\$6) is South Africa's contribution, the skin snappy and the firm beef filling brawny with ground coriander.

Skinny Tunisian merguez (\$6) is doubled up in the bun, the soft and juicy lamb burning with harissa.

There's a distinct Quebec profile to the duck sausage (\$9) subtly flavoured with maple syrup. More impressively, it contains foie gras. Too short for the bun, the first bite is all bread. After that, you really taste the foie.

The venison (\$9), however, is so overpowered by red pepper we might as well be eating ground pork. Bison (\$9) with whole blueberries is another slice of Canadiana.

Chef Jason Costatini takes pains with toppings. He fries onions until they crumple brown. His sauerkraut is tangy but not acrid. Sautéed yellow and red bell peppers are sweetly slippery, while sautéed jalapenos are firm. (I know this from my first visit. On my second, I don't get any of the requested toppings. Ketchup and mustard are redundant.)

He grills the buttery, fluffy custom Golden Wheat buns until they're striped black. This will leave marks on your cheeks but a smile on your face.

I try regular (\$3.50) and duck fat (\$4.50) fries side by side. Both come in red-checked paper cones. Both are judiciously salted. But the duck-fat fries are elusively better, more potato-y. Blame umami. The dips are unremarkable.

I didn't want to order a currywurst, because I think of it as drunken soccer fan food. But what a dummkopf I am: one bite of Wvrst's curry ketchup, a pulpy sauce with respectable heat and muted spices, converts me.

Following the KISS principle — keep it simple, stupid — Wvrst doesn't serve dessert. Instead, staff send us down the street for Kawartha Dairy ice cream at Cool Hand Luc, another Entertainment District success story.

Beer, fries and sausages. It's the best of Wvrst.

Wvrst's suds selection beats most beer halls

Sometimes an imitation can be better than the original.

Wvrst would be a case in point. As charming as German beer halls can be, most of the ones in Germany serve just a handful of beers, most made by whatever large brewery has an official tie-in with the hall.

At the King St. W. sausage palace, however, the selection of brews would dazzle (or puzzle) most Teutonic folks. Owner Aldo Lanzillotta has 16 draft taps, as well as 20 different bottled and canned brews. While there are some classic beer hall choices such as Hacker-Pschorr-Edelhell (a pale lager) or the cloudy, banana-scented wheat beer from Weihenstephan, there are also plenty of other good beers with which to wash down your wurst. There's everything from Hitachino Nest White, a Belgian-style wheat beer from Japan, to Dieu du Ciel Aphrodite, a strong stout from Quebec flavoured with cocoa nibs and vanilla beans. There are also a fair number of Ontario craft beers on offer.

The wide-ranging list was by design, says Lanzillotta, who worked with beer author and consultant Stephen Beaumont to put the suds selection together.

"Getting the right beers was as important as getting the right sausages," said Lanzillotta. "We didn't just have German sausages, so why would we just have German beers?"

He's also got a couple of choices craft beer aficionados might shun, including hipster favourite Pabst Blue Ribbon (the only beer at Wvrst that's served in a traditional one-litre masskrug glass). Not that he's apologizing for it.

"We wanted to be a place where everybody could find a beer they'd like," said Lanzillotta.

Suggested sausage pairings

Corne du Diable IPA/merguez sausage and harissa: There's enough citrusy, piney hop character in this Quebec microbrew to handle the heat and richness of the spicy lamb sausage.

Hitachino Nest White/boerwoers: Brilliant because of the coriander seed in both.

Stowford Pressed Cider/duck foie gras sausage: Succeeds thanks to the cider's complex sweetness and hint of acidity.

Josh Rubin

apataki@thestar.ca

www.twitter.com/amyapataki