



The entrance and interior of Mielżyński, the wine store that's revolutionising Warsaw's approach to wine.

WARSAW'S VIBRANT WINE STORE

The appearance of Canadian born oenologist and wine merchant Robert Mielżyński upended Warsaw's wine scene, writes Tomasz Prange-Barczyński. His stylish warehouse, wine bar, restaurant and shop is now the wine heart of the Polish capital.

A picture of dozens of people roaming around little islands of wooden wine cases, looking and touching bottles in silent concentration is still relatively new in Warsaw. Seeing them at the bar sipping wine is even more strange. The city's street culture boomed in 1990s, with hundreds of pubs where Poles drowned memories of communist dullness in hectolitres of beer. The first specialised wine shops appeared in the late 1990s, but most of them remained luxury boutiques full of anonymous (for most of the customers) brands and – in many cases – served by arrogant staff. Fear of the unknown became at that time the principal wine experience for many Poles. When 44-year-old Robert



Mielżyński in a nutshell

Turnover 2007:	€5.5m (\$8.5m)
Number of retail customers:	2,000
Average in-store purchase:	€75-90 (\$116-139)
Newsletters generated per year:	50
Number of newsletters sent:	5,000
Labels carried:	500
Number of bottles in the warehouse:	25-30,000

Mielżyński opened his wine bar and warehouse in 2004, everything changed.

Wine education

The concept is clear: the warehouse and shop are placed in the same open space. "We are not a wine country and many people have never been in a winery. This space, with the enormous number of bottles and labyrinthine paths between the cases should give them the feeling of a true wine cellar," says Mielżyński. The warehouse is kept as simple as possible and connected to a large wine bar where – and this was a great novelty in Poland four years ago – more than 20 wines are sold by glasses. Further, Mielżyński is ready to open

almost any bottle on the shelf merely to serve a glass to anyone interested.

“We never ask: can I help you? Certainly, we are here to help,” says Mielżyński, who spends hours talking about the regions, describing the wines and tasting together with the customers. Seeing him roam around the tables with the open bottle, asking “would you like to taste?” is a standard sight at Burakowska Street. This has had a major effect on business. After four years, the company, which offers 500 labels in just 600m², has reached an annual turnover of €5.5m (\$8.5m), surpassing many larger companies who have had a longer presence on the Polish wine scene.

At least twice a year, Mielżyński prepares major tasting events: ‘Bud Break’ and ‘Grand Cru’ offer Warsaw’s audience the chance to meet such wine personalities as Elisabetta and Martin Foradori, Christiano Van Zeller, Marco Felluga, Lamberto Frescobaldi, Heinrich Breuer and many others. The events take place in a large garden in front of the warehouse and after the tasting there are charity dinners and jazz concerts.

Location, location, location

People certainly come to buy wine, but also for lunch or dinner, or sometimes for just a cup of espresso. Although they hardly ever leave the warehouse without at least one bottle, they usually buy wine by the case. Logistics was therefore one of the most important conditions when choosing the location, a small street in a previously industrial part of Warsaw, just ten minutes drive from the city centre and just in front of the largest shopping mall in town. The hidden yard is today the headquarters of the most stylish design boutiques, photographers and public relations agencies. It is a trendy place, but with perfect access. Mielżyński points out that the possibility of driving a car almost to the warehouse door helps him to achieve volume in selling. That said, staff will carry customers’ wine to their cars.

There are couple of stars among the wines imported directly by Mielżyński, including Foradori’s Granato, Siro

Pacenti’s Brunello di Montalcino, Roda from Rioja, Georg Breuer and Van Volxem from Germany, Champagne Deutz, and Sonoma Valley’s Seghesio, along with a handful of Bordeaux such Chevalier and Kirwan. More importantly, the prices for those wines are comparable to those in Berlin, Milan and Paris, and far lower than in other shops in Warsaw. Mielżyński abhors the practice of Polish merchants who put bottles on the shelf with a relatively high price and then discount them by



➤➤ Poland is still an open game. There’s enough room for serious importers here. ◀◀

Robert Mielżyński, owner of the very successful warehouse and wine bar in Warsaw.

5%, 10% or even 20%. “I don’t want to give a discount, I want to sell good wine at a fair price,” he says.

Beyond wine, the shop has also become a food destination. Having begun with the simple things like home made bread, fresh Tuscan oil, salami, prosciutti and pecorino, Mielżyński now serves gourmet lunches and dinners based on seasonal fresh products, often prepared by young chefs for the individual orders of regular clients. Forest mushrooms, game (the owner used to be a hunter and served his own kill), truffles, excellent Polish foie gras and other delicacies

prepared as simply as possible are common on the daily menu. Hardly anyone could imagine eating that fare without at least a glass of wine, which again is unusual in Polish restaurants, where wine is rarely paired with food.

Past and future

Mielżyński is the son of Polish emigrants who left the country after Second World War. He grew up in the family wine business. His brother, Peter Mielżyński, owns one of the most successful wine agencies in Canada (PMA). Robert himself studied oenology at Fresno University in California and later worked for Breuer in the Rheingau, Schlumberger in Vienna and Kirwan in Margaux. Most of his teachers became his friends and, later, partners in business. Today he owns Haut La Plagne in Saint Émilion together with the well-known Cognac producer, Jean-Jacques Godet.

Godet is also a minor shareholder in the Warsaw business, along with Peter Mielżyński and two other investors. But it is Robert Mielżyński who makes all the decisions and runs the warehouse. He came back to Poland in 1994 to prepare distribution channels for major wine and spirit brands, on behalf of a corporation. After a few years, he decided to create his own smaller business. Then, when it became clear on 1 May 2004 that Poland would join the European Union, he said: “this is the moment” and Burakowska opened that summer.

After four years of successful work in Warsaw, Mielżyński decided to expand his activity to other major Polish cities. His first move was a slightly smaller warehouse in Poznań in western Poland, just 250km from Berlin. His next step will most likely be Wrocław, a dynamic city in south-western Poland.

Mielżyński once played professional hockey for Fortuna Düsseldorf and still has enough energy to practice this exhaustive sport on Warsaw’s old boys’ team. His next goal, however, will be to find the right people to help him to run his shops in other cities. In today’s Poland, this is still a real challenge. ■