'Never put a Wisconsin Brat on a Chicago grill!'
—Tip from a Bobak’s Sausageologist

If you didn’t grow up eating blood barley, you’re going to remember the first time you eat blood barley. My first time was at the Bobak Sausage Company on Chicago’s Southwest Side. It wasn’t my last.

First of all, it’s important to appreciate that the “blood” in “blood barley” is not a translation error from the original Polish; it’s not a euphemism and it’s certainly not a joke. I don’t know what blood barley is exactly, and I don’t care to find out. All I know is that it really is made with blood—pig’s blood—and far more of it than you might think. As far as I can tell, there’s no barley in it, just a lot of blood and something brown, lentil-sized, and chewy. I also know that it’s very, very good.

I try to go to Bobak’s about once a month to buy groceries, eat from the hot bar, and play the lottery. Bobak’s is the largest Polish supermarket in Chicago and also one of the largest non-Oscar Mayer Class encased meat purveyors in the country. In other big time 25 percent-plus Polish neighborhoods around the country, you’re guaranteed to see a lot of vacuum-sealed packages marked with Bobak’s big red logo and its mascot: a cartoon pig with big eyes wearing a red-on-white three-piece suit. Bobak’s brand is the “preferred” hot dog and polish of the Chicago Bears, as well as one of the major food suppliers for the Sox and a number of its farm teams. It has pretty much cornered the US market on mass-produced but still passably authentic Polish food, and can be likened to the Polish sister of Goya or Manischewitz.
Bobak’s international headquarters, which is also the location of its supermarket and where—quite literally—the sausage is made, is located just a few blocks north of Midway Airport on Archer Avenue in a neighborhood that’s just about as Polish as you can get on the South Side these days. A good deal of the clientele and staff look Polish and will often try to talk to you in an angrier than average version of the language. But, as soon as your eyes glaze over with fish-out-of-water terror, everyone switches to English and you feel comfortable again.

You can find blood barley in three places at Bobak’s: (a) at the hot food bar, (b) under the sneeze-guarded deli section in a large black bowl with a big spoon, and (c) in the hot food bar overflow section, where all the stuff that people didn’t want that day is repacked into gigantic containers and sold at a discount cheap enough to make you think something had died before, after, or during the repacking process.

Bobak’s is in a large space and isn’t organized very well. It’s more an object of utility than accuracy to call it a supermarket, since it’s more like an overgrown bodega occupying a space a few sizes too big. Bobak’s has a nice supply of crannies, or places for barrels of pickles, kraut, and old men to read Dziennik Zwiazkowy and watch the hopper cars roll by on the grade crossing on Archer.

The thing to write home about is the hot food bar. Bobak’s is, at heart, a glorified deli, so most of their product is sold by the pound. This principle carries over with some distinction to the hot food bar, where you can scoop out
cantaloupe-sized portions of breaded pork tenderloin and walk away without having to break a five. The food is $3.99 per/lb and lowers to a heartbreaking $2.99 per/lb by the late afternoon.

About half the food you can scoop out of the hot bar is self-consciously Polish—sausages with or without kraut, breaded meat, etc. Even so, the little white placards bearing the names of those things scoopable are all in English, except for “kielbasa,” “blintzes” and “sauerkraut” (which is actually in German). Kotlet schabowy goes by “breaded pork cutlet;” its well-known counterpart, the Kotlet z piersi Kurczaka becomes just a “breaded chicken cutlet.”

The other half of the food is just as self-consciously non-Polish as the other half is. BBQ pork ribs abut buffalo wings; mac & cheese settles in next to chorizo. Multiculturalism doesn’t end at the banks of the hot bar, though. The whole store has offerings aimed at the other—mainly Hispanic—ethnic groups moving into the neighborhood, as well as the large black communities to the south and east.

Bobak’s sets up a lot of buffet-style chafing dishes with sausage samples around the store. The ones near the front are almost always Polish or comfortably within the American encased meat canon. The ones near the back are usually Italian or some kind of chorizo. Seeing chorizo being offered for free is one of the most obviously strange things you see while shopping at Bobak’s. But when you really think about it, the weirder thing is that they sell brats.

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Brats are German, and the Poles haven’t liked the Germans for about as long as there’s been a Poland and way longer than there’s been a Germany. A pet project of the Teutonic peoples seems to have been leading various bouts of Poland partitioning with a rogue’s gallery of Hapsburgs, Czars, Soviets, Lithuanians, Bohemians, etc. Of course, being partitioned is not something anyone really enjoys, and relations between the two countries certainly didn’t get any better in the period when the Prussian Empire became the German Empire and the German Empire slithered into the Third Reich.

The 1939 Molotov-Ribbentropp Pact gave Stalin half of Poland in exchange for his word not to go to war with Hitler in the event the Nazis would invade Poland (which they would). After the Nazis reneged on the deal, and after the eventual Nazi defeat at Stalingrad, the Soviet’s counter offensive ran straight through Poland. The Nazis, perhaps inspired by their Soviet enemy, embarked on a full-scale scorched earth policy in Poland, scientifically razing Polish cities and towns as they retreated. The Soviets had strict orders not to interfere with the Nazis—the theory being that the Poles would be easier to dominate if their entire social infrastructure were destroyed—and so made a point of arriving just a little too late to stop the Nazis from burning, looting, and raping. Along with close to 3 million Polish Jews, the Nazis systematically killed about 2 million ethnic Poles during the war.

But brats are one of Bobak’s biggest sellers and have been for some time. Bobak’s doesn’t distribute other companies’ brats, but they do, in fact, devote a serious chunk of their own operations to brat production. Brats are a Chicago
staple, and have been since German immigrants first brought them to the city in the mid 19th century. Until the Great Migration, Germans were the largest ethnic group in Chicago and remain the largest ethnic group in Illinois, with 1/5th of Illinoisans reporting German ancestry, while the runner-up Irish report close to 1/10th.

While the brat and even the polish have a substantial following in the Midwest, nothing compares regionally and certainly nationally to the encased meat dominance of the hot dog.

Is there any food more American than the hot dog? Maybe the hamburger. But of course, the hamburger isn’t really American; it’s named for Hamburg, Germany, the city of its semi-mythological origin. On the face of it, it’s harder to guess where the hot dog is from, but it gets a lot easier if you go back to it’s old name: the frankfurter. The hot dog is sort of the 20th century equivalent of freedom fries, but the name managed to stick in most parts of the country even as anti-German hysteria disappeared.

Point is, you can’t walk two feet in the big-time encased meat game without having to sell something fundamentally German. Dozens of sausage manufacturers get by selling only Italian or Greek varieties, but they’re niche. Winston’s (Irish/Scottish) on 63rd is an example. But Bobak’s is in it for the big time. You’ll see Bobak’s products in Walgreens and Jewel-Osco. You can’t say that for Winston’s.

Bobak’s was founded in 1967; or, put another way, a giant leap into the past with respect to generational mores. Attitudes among the employees and the
management were probably quite different. To put it bluntly but politely, ethnic identity was much stronger and so were the corresponding ethnic enmities. A lot of Bobak’s customer’s—the neighborhood folks—probably would have answered “Polish” if you asked what they were. The management, too.

So, in 1967, I wonder if there was some discussion. If, at one point, Bobak’s big men had to decide to do something their parents—or even themselves—would have found quite vile. If the men I know only through proud black and white pictures on the way to the Bobak’s bathroom sat down one day and figured that in order to expand—or even to stay afloat—they had to start selling brats.

While this could have happened, I sort of doubt it. Bobak’s represents the end of something. Bobak’s represents the endpoint of a kind of assimilation that stops itself somewhere just before total cultural atomization. Bobak’s is American made. Bobak’s is Chicago made. The Chicago Bobak’s was born into—the Chicago of 1967—was undoubtedly much different than the Chicago of 1927 or 1897. I don’t think the founders of Bobak’s had to make some grand moral choice to start selling brats. Of course, I’ll never know, but I don’t think so, and there certainly aren’t any clues left lying around that make me think so. It was a choice made for them by America, and, more immediately, Chicago.

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Chicago may be the easiest American city for a nostalgic. Unlike most other American cities, which are either too messily great or just not great enough, Chicago’s history and its historical legacy are curiously well defined and handily
distilled into an elevator speech: nature’s metropolis, big shoulders, hog butcher, city of neighborhoods, second, city that works, not Cleveland, not St. Louis, not Detroit, Obama. One of the great privileges of an American, which is only magnified for a Chicagoan, is that we routinely get to eat other people’s food. Or, put another way, we routinely get to experience other peoples. Chicago isn’t America’s most diverse city, and it hasn’t been for some time—if it ever was. But I wouldn’t be surprised if most people thought it is and that it had been for most of the last century.

Chicago is inextricably tied to ethnicity and specifically to the notion of the clearly defined ethnic neighborhood. There are blacks on one side of the tracks and Irish on the other, Jews on one side of the North Branch and Bohemians on the other. This idea, these Little Xs, Ys, and Zs, where you can eat both the most authentic and most unpronounceable food, has always been the piece of the past that I find the most beautiful. It’s one that I keep searching for today, and it’s undoubtedly the real, cards-on-the-table reason I love Bobak’s so much.

But it’s an idea and a myth and it never really happened. The reality of crushing poverty and *de facto* and—especially for blacks—*de jure* ghettoization is just that: a stark and inescapable reality. That aside, something else remains. These neighborhoods, for me and probably for you, were essentially inaccessible. Visiting another neighborhood, even if that neighborhood was the same ethnicity as your own, was not something you could do lightly. If my Russian Jewish self were transported back to an earlier and 60 percent foreign-born era Chicago, I’d be hard pressed to satisfy a cannoli craving by traveling a
few blocks to the east where you could, at least in theory, get some of the best cannolis in America. I wouldn’t be from the neighborhood, so, forget about it.

At Bobak’s, you’re not getting the best or the most authentic, but what you are getting—key phrase: “are getting”—is a flavor of something that happened a long time ago. You’re getting something ethnic, but you’re allowed to get it. Anyone is. The guys who run Bobak’s, the people who work there, they probably all answer “Chicagoan” when you ask them what they are. When you hear them on TV promoting their Maxwell Street Polishes, hot dogs, or brats, they have the same Northern Cities Vowel Shift as all the other Chi-CAWW-go-ans. You get the sense that running Bobak’s has become a more typical family business for these guys, just like a contracting company or an accounting firm. You don’t get the sense that they have some sacred duty to fulfill for the Polish community in Chicago or the nation. Sure, at some point it was self-consciously Polish and that was important. But today it’s just a supermarket that happens to sell Polish products to a still sizable cadre of Polish people. More than that, they’re the “Preferred Hot Dog of the Chicago Bears.” That’s what’s really important.

Bobak’s shows you where Chicago is going; i.e., it shows you where America is going. Unlike some of its smaller, more authentic, and better counterparts in the Old Neighborhood, Bobak’s existence isn’t predicated on the existence of the Old Neighborhood. The truth is, especially for white ethnics, the days of the Old Neighborhood are numbered. Most of the delis and bakeries and churches and tailors and bars and athletic clubs that have “been there forever”
have either shuttered, changed hands, or are simply left waiting for their owners, customers, and/or employees to die.

Bobak’s own neighborhood is majority Hispanic; and there are more blacks in the old Old Neighborhood than Poles. But this doesn't mean Bobak's is going under. Bobak's customers are no longer just Poles, but Polish-Americans—and also just plain Americans. The customer base is shifting from people who grew up eating only Kielbasa, Bigos, and Goląbki because that's all their mothers knew how to cook, to the people who ate sausage, Hunter's Stew, and stuffed cabbage, because that's what their mothers thought was traditional. Maybe eventually stuffed cabbage was replaced by taco night.

Bobak’s is self-sustaining. It doesn't need the Old Neighborhood anymore. All it needs are Slavic-Americans—from Chicago, from the suburbs, it doesn't matter—who want to maintain a little bit of their own ethnic identity in a way that doesn't require giving up substantial chunks of Americanness. Really, Bobak's doesn't even need Slavic-Americans: it needs Italians, African-Americans, Swedes, etc, who just want a little ethnic flavor. Maybe it just needs people who want a damn good deal on brats. Maybe it just needs people, no matter who they are, to see blood barley smoldering in a chaffing dish and decide to grab the big spoon.