

# Soup's on

## Brookline shop fills niche for homemade goodies



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**BROOKLINE** - Creativity comes naturally to Chef Marjorie Druker.

"It's not difficult for me to come up with ideas," she admits. "That's my middle name!"

It was this instinctive creativity that shaped the image for the business Druker and her husband, Paul Brophy, created. The New England Soup Factory is a food emporium/restaurant defying categorization.

Druker's success is due to her delicious ideas, but also to a unique food memory that allows her to travel back in time as a food sensation bursts on her palate.

"The other day I was eating a tomato," she recalled, explaining a tomato is a tiny green tomato, pickled in an olive brine. "And I remembered the first time I had seen one."

The memories are important to the comfort that Druker wants her foods to provide. "It's a rushed crazy world, and people want to know, is there a way to recapture the nostalgia of the past? This is our way of doing that."

The foods may be comforting, but they are never banal. Druker, who grew up in Newton and was the chef who opened the very first Boston Chicken outlet and created the chain's recipes, works at flavor and quality to come up with menu items that are the ultimate in their categories.

If it's a chicken pot pie, for example, it's an intense and rich dish filled with chicken cooked in homemade stock and fresh vegetables.

"I love to work with the seasons," says Druker. "Plus I try to use things that people don't cook." Whether it's cheddar biscuits, gazpacho, chili, or steak, potato and mushroom soup, she'll work at the recipe until it reaches the point where it becomes the pinnacle of perfection for that dish.

"We look for the 'Oh My God!' factor," she says with a laugh. "Seriously, mediocre is not allowed in this store. Everything has to be special."

She finds during the holidays this philosophy is especially appealing to cus-

tomers who want to create food memories but have trouble fitting cooking into stressed-out lives.

Her Rosh Hashanah menu includes Chicken Vegetable Soup with Noodles, Sweet and Sour Cabbage Soup with Dill, and Lima Bean and Barley Soup. And there's also choices of traditional appetizers, entrees, salads, sides, and tempting desserts: Caramel Custard Kugel, Aunt Hannah's Apricot Strudel, Apple Cakes, Wild Flower Honey Cakes, and more.

When Thanksgiving comes around she lets customers cook their own turkeys, but her staff creates an array of side dishes including traditional favorites with extra dollops of excitement: Corn Bread, Apple and Cashew Stuffing or Spicy Pumpkin Gingerbread.

At Christmas they do the traditional *Bûche de Noël* Yule log cake, as well as roasted duck, and Hot Wild Cherry Soup.

The kitchen in the back of the Brookline Village store is the hub of the soup and meal making activities. Huge pots of stock have simmered all night and are awaiting the additions of the fresh vegetables

that will give them their individual soup character.

Chicken is smoked for the Smoked Chicken Salad or Pulled Chicken Sandwiches, turkeys are roasted, and salad dressings are homemade.

A tray of sweet potatoes is about to be drizzled with seasoning and roasted, a chef at a nearby station is finishing a pot of Yellow Tomato and Rice Soup.

A tray of Thai Lime Chicken, fragrant with citrus, coconut, garlic and spices, has been pulled out and is being arranged on a platter with lime garnishes for the display case. In the other store, in Newton, the pastry chef concocts marvels that entice diners to top off

lunch or dinner with an indulgence.

What the customers see in the front of the store is a celebration of the efforts in the kitchen. The murals that embellish the walls are Marjorie's work.

"We didn't have a lot of money when we opened, but we wanted everything to have an exciting look," she says.

The exciting look is carried over to her chef's coat, classic white with a collar and pocket trimmed in a watermelon print fabric.

"I have someone who makes them for me," Druker says of her uniform. "I'm a very strong person. Everything I do is strong."

She explains the strength is intrinsic to the foods and their flavors, but also to



Marjorie Druker, chef and co-owner of New England Soup Factory, displays the many goodies for sale at her Brookline store.

PHOTO BY SUZANNE HANSMIRE

her look. Her hair and makeup, the hair jewelry that matches her earrings, all are part of the expression of her personality.

But much of what customers see is also a result of the planning Druker put in to ensure the quality and integrity of her dishes would be obvious to newcomers.

Before they order a salad, they see it on display. The cases are filled with vegetables and entrees arranged on artisanal-looking rectangular ceramic platters.

And the desserts - well let's just say customers have trouble resisting the goodies that Druker says were inspired

by the sweets that her mother-in-law used to pack in Paul's lunchbox when he was a kid.

"He was a fat boy," she reveals to a curious customer who has overheard her.

According to Brophy, also co-owner, the business plan is to expand. Construction is under way on a 4,700-square-foot commercial kitchen in Needham, and they're hoping their two stores will increase to 10 within the next four years.

"We're taking it day by day," he says cautiously.

*New England Soup Factory, 24 Brookline Place, across from Brookline Village T stop (end of Rte. 9), Brookline (617) 739-1899.*