

# Business

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/DAVID L. RYAN

Marjorie Draker (top) prepares several offerings at The New England Soup Factory in Brookline. At right, customers line up for their bowls.

## Restaurants: Soups

# Ladling up a winner

### Sip by sip, Brookline kitchen builds on food's piping popularity

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**B**ROOKLINE - EVER SINCE THE TELEVISION sitcom "Seinfeld" featured a smister midtown Manhattan chef dubbed the "Soup Nazi," soup has gained respectability as an alternative to fast food.

In New York, a handful of imitators has emerged since the Seinfeld parody of a West 55th Street soup stand. Boston, however, has been slow to follow the trend. For many New Englanders, soup means "chowdah" and experiments with new flavors are viewed with suspicion.

But The New England Soup Factory, a Brookline hole-in-the-wall, has earned the approval of a popular food critic and frequently has customers lined up for its soup. It may have caught a sudden wave of interest that has made soup a hot food again.



"If you can find more delicious, made-from-scratch soup, call me," said the Phantom Gourmet, WBZ's food critic, during a telephone interview. "The Soup Factory is a hidden jewel. They have singlehandedly elevated the status of soup."

In the Seinfeld episode, customers wait in long lines and risk a loud "No soup for you" from the shop's owner for any infraction of his rules.

At the Soup Factory, customers take a number and wait, but the atmosphere is a lot more relaxed. Co-owners Marjorie Draker and Paul Brophy, both 32, greet customers by name and sometimes have time for fun at the tiny soup, salad and sandwich place behind Skipjack's in Brookline Village.

On a recent slow day after Christmas, Brophy tried, without success, to dissuade one customer from buying the last double chocolate walnut lemonie. His reasoning? "There won't be any for me to eat later."

The Soup Factory opened one month before the Seinfeld episode. But it may have been born when Draker was a youngster

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# Brookline soup outlet a winner

## ■ SOUP

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and visited the original Steve's Ice Cream in Somerville's Davis Square.

"I loved the idea that the flavors weren't just chocolate and vanilla and they combined unique ingredients," she recalled. "I knew then that I wanted to have a place to sell soup with lots of different flavors."

But why soup?

"As long as I can remember, people have been asking me to make soup, so I figured I may as well make some money."

Each morning, Druker starts with fresh vegetables and creates at least six soups, which might include: clam and lobster chowder, carrot and ginger, sweet and sour cabbage with dill. There's always chicken soup, the best seller. A bowl of soup costs \$3.95.

Druker was also inspired by Boston Chicken, where she worked as a chef. The chicken and steamed vegetables are an alternative to fast food for yuppies with kids, she said.

The fast-food market, Druker said, is packed with outlets offering limited and unappetizing fare. "It's not easy to find high quality food that looks and tastes good."

Mara Slawsky, a cardiologist at the nearby Veterans Administration Hospital, is a regular. She was on her way out the door with a bowl of chicken vegetable with noodles. "It's good medicine," she said with a laugh. "I'm a physician and I believe in it."

Brophy and Druker met while at-

tending culinary school. Together, they learned classical French and international cuisine. But Druker said nothing can replace growing up in an ethnic home. "No one can teach me how to make chicken soup," she said. "It's inbred."

After working for a few restaurants, Druker started a catering service at age 25. "But I didn't cater for just anybody," she said. "It was catering for very affluent families."

In 1994, the couple wrote a business plan for the Soup Factory and received the usual round of loan rejections from banks. In the meantime, Brophy continued his day job at the Black Goose, a restaurant near the State House, while Druker catered.

By the summer of 1995, Druker found the space in Brookline Village and secured a loan from Brophy's parents, who took out a mortgage on their home. She worked solo until the business took off and Brophy joined her full-time.

The restaurant has grown from grossing \$1,000 a day to three times that today. Yet Druker recalled that when she applied for chef jobs at fancy restaurants in her early 20s, she routinely got rejected.

"They told me that I'd make a great hostess and saw me as a nice Jewish girl from Newton who wears lipstick," she said. "But I wanted to cook for people."

Now she's doing just that. The couple report that they had \$750,000 in gross revenue this year.

If the Soup Factory is still serving soup in 2000, it will be among

only a small percentage of small businesses that survive for five years, according to Sylvan Linn, a counselor from the Small Business Administration's Senior Corps of Retired Executives program.

"The mortality rate for any start-up company is 80 percent," he said. "Many small restaurants fail because the food isn't high quality, the location is bad, management skills are lacking and there's nothing unique about it."

But Druker said she never considered failure. "I knew it would work," she said. "When my father asked, 'What if you fail?' I could only think positively."

While the restaurant can't be seen from Route 9, Druker said, their location has turned out to be their biggest advantage.

"We're near the hospitals and doctor's offices," she said. "People come in sneezing and coughing with sore throats and infected ears and I have the cure: chicken soup."

Druker recently found the cure for more room. She secured additional space in Brookline Village for expansion. They also have set their eyes on several Newton locations.

Rena Keller, a Boston Public School teacher who lives nearby, dropped in for a bowl of soup during her Christmas break instead of cooking for herself.

"I love soup but I didn't want to open another can of Campbell's," she said. "This is the best."