

It's unanimous among traditional chicken soup chefs: Start by simmering the broth a long time BY KATHLEEN BURGE | GLOBE STAFF

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When Marjorie Druker was 19 and started dating Paul Brophy, a fellow culinary student at Johnson & Wales University, the first thing she cooked for him was her chicken soup. Druker was raised in Newton and cooked her soup in the Jewish tradition of her childhood. Brophy was Roman Catholic.

Brophy loved the soup, and it wasn't long before he and Druker fell in love.

They married, and went on to build their business, the New England Soup Factory in Brookline and Newton, on that very chicken soup, along with a few others. And 27 years after she first fed the soup to her husband-to-be, Druker still has strong feelings about how to make chicken soup.

"I'm a traditionalist when it comes to making great chicken soup," she said. "And I think the secret is you need to cook it for a great amount of time so you release as much of the collagen from the bones."

Good chicken broth is the essence of great soup, and most chefs insist on making their own. If they've been boning chickens for another dish, there are plenty of meaty bones on hand. Chefs tend to scorn the idea of making soup using commercial broth (though some allow that home cooks shouldn't shy away from buying broth if they don't have time to make their own). When it comes to making chicken soup, everyone has opinions - usually very, very strong ones.

Druker maintains that a long simmer gives soup its flavor, its texture, and something she calls fortification, meaning the process of extracting essential elements from the ingredients. Water gets transformed into a broth thick with fiber, chlorophyll, vitamins, collagen, fat, and protein. Druker cooks her broth for six to eight hours, then strains the soup. She doesn't use the vegetables that have been sitting in the soup pot for hours - she adds fresh ones.

The fresh vegetables dress up the bowl. "It's like changing your clothes on a Saturday night," she says.

Druker has one special ingredient that she believes gives her soup an unexpected sweetness. "In the Jewish tradition, we put parsnip in our soup," she says. "Parsnip gives it this naturally earthy, really sweet overtone. The stock is rich and full of body. But when you're adding the parsnip and the onion and the celery, you're giving it this earthy flavor."

"You have to have a good chicken broth," says Annette Manetas, who owns Andros Diner in Belmont with her husband, John, the chef. "If you don't have a good chicken broth, you're not going to make it as a soup."

John Manetas prepares the restaurant's avgolemono, Greek egg lemon soup. He starts by making his own chicken broth, boiling the chicken without herbs. "When the chicken is done, the broth is done," he says. After the broth is ready, he adds rice or orzo (he prefers the latter), pieces of chicken, and a little salt and pepper. At the very end, he stirs in beaten egg yolk and lemon juice.

Michael Queen, owner of Max's Deli Cafe on Milk Street in Boston, cooks his chickens eight hours to make the broth. He religiously adds what he calls the trinity of vegetables: carrots, celery, and onion.

At Pho Pasteur in Chinatown, owner Sau Cai takes chicken soup very seriously - it brings in about half the restaurant's revenue. There, pho ga (Vietnamese chicken noodle soup) is made with a combination of chicken broth and beef broth, made from flank steak, although diners can also order the soup made with only chicken broth. "Most of my customers, more than 80 percent, want meat broth in their chicken soup," Cai says.

Cai, too, simmers the chicken four hours to make the broth. He adds anise, ginger, onion, salt, scallions, and one surprising ingredient: rock sugar. Rock sugar, he says, is softer, more tender, than more processed sugars. The bowl of

pho is delivered to the diner with optional add-ins like Thai basil, sprouts, lime, and more scallions.

This time of year, chicken soup tends to feel as much like medicine as food. (And some studies have suggested that the soup really does improve cold symptoms.)

"Chicken soup not only feeds your body well, but chicken soup has an effect on your soul," Druker says. "It really warms you. It can stir feelings when you eat. It makes you feel that someone has really taken the time and energy to give you something that is so nutritive and so healing."

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