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New England Soup Factory Inc. Ltd.

Soup retailer gets back to basics -- and profits

**Premium content from Boston Business Journal by Naomi R. Kooker,
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In 1999, husband-and-wife team Paul Brophy and Marjorie Druker were flying high -- or at least that's what it looked like.

The New England Soup Factory Inc. Ltd. owners and operators had three retail locations, were developing a state-of-the-art commissary in Needham and doing \$5 million in sales when they noticed a slight glitch: Expenses were exceeding sales and they were bleeding \$10,000 a week. And they had put up \$450,000 of their own money for the commissary, waiting for a bank loan that never came through.

In February 2001 the couple reluctantly filed for bankruptcy.

Five years later, New England Soup Factory is stronger now than it was before. While the couple is back to operating two stores -- the original Brookline location and another in Newton -- sales are growing at about 12 percent annually. Because Druker, the executive chef, and Brophy, the director of operations, returned to their core concept of serving homemade soups, salads and sandwiches in a "grab-and-go" style, operations are more streamlined, quality has improved, waste margins have narrowed and, at long last, the couple feels like New England Soup Factory is back.

This fall, Druker, 43, is launching her first cookbook -- a longtime dream.

Brophy, 42, is taking measured steps to explore franchising more stores under

P&M Enterprises LLC. There is one franchise in Salem.

"Sometimes you have to reach the saddest, lowest ... part of your life to know what to do to make it better," said Druker, dressed in a chef's coat trimmed in pink. She allowed tears while talking about the bankruptcy.

Druker, who was the founding chef for the Boston Market concept, opened New England Soup Factory in 1995. The couple's daughter, Emily, was just 3 years old. It was risky starting their own business, yet they were confident they had a winning concept. "For the first six years we were on fire," said Brophy.

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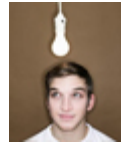
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