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## Soup provides a bowlful of warmth for a winter day

January 23, 2008 | Lisa Zwirn, Globe Correspondent

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When inspiration strikes - or when we have a stretch of miserable weather - soup cooks spring into action.

They know what it takes to have a pot simmering at a moment's notice. Their pantry, refrigerator, and freezer are jammed with ingredients to toss into a stockpot. And on an unusual day when the cupboard seems bare, they can make do. A few vegetables, an onion, a carrot, a clove of garlic, a couple of chicken legs, and a sprinkling of spices will turn into a brimming bowl of dinner. Soup expert Marjorie Druker says that "with just a few mainstays, you can always come up with something homemade."

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Druker, 43, founder with her husband, Paul Brophy, of the New England Soup Factory, has been at this for over a decade. She and the staff prepare 10 soups daily for Brookline and Newton locations. At home, Druker, co-author of the "New England Soup Factory Cookbook," often whips up her daughter Emily's favorites: lentil, minestrone, and butter bean and barley, "especially on those dead-of-winter days," she says.

Most good bowls start with aromatics and vegetables, so Druker keeps these in ample supply. In her home kitchen in Newton, a large bowl filled with onions, garlic, and sweet and white potatoes sits on a small antique table. Her refrigerator holds carrots, celery, turnips, and parsnips, which last for weeks. Root vegetables can keep for months in a cool, dry basement. Druker recommends keeping homemade stock in the freezer, along with plenty of frozen vegetables, chicken breasts, sausage, bacon, and stew beef.

Then there are the shelf-stable ingredients such as dried white beans, yellow and green split peas, lentils, barley, rice, and tiny pasta shapes, which "should be in every soup-maker's kitchen," says Druker. Ready-made broth, she says, "certainly makes life easy."

Many chefs find inspiration in ordinary roots. Evoo chef and owner Peter McCarthy relies on potatoes, parsnips, celery root, and turnips for making soup, along with winter squashes for thick purees. "With the addition of onion, leeks, stock, and cream, which are all pretty basic ingredients," says the chef, "you can pull something together really quickly."

He has a basic formula for creating some of his favorite soups, such as potato bacon, pear celery root, and Macomber turnip and apple. First, he sweats onion, garlic, and leeks in fat. Sweating means to cook aromatics slowly over low heat until they soften without browning. The choice of fat depends on what's appropriate for the soup, says McCarthy, such as butter for a cream base, olive oil for a hearty bean or tomato soup, and bacon fat for a soup containing the smoky strips.

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