

Marjorie Druker: Bowled over by soup at New England Soup Factory

By Robin Lee Allen



UNDER THE TOQUE

With the thermometer's mercury hardly budging out of the teens in the Northeast, business at Marjorie Druker's three New England Soup Factory restaurants is steaming. With the help of her husband, Paul Brophy, the ebullient Druker dispenses more than 300 gallons of soup daily. But Druker's venue is no flash-in-the-pan Soup Nazi knock-off. While she prides herself on bold

and intense soups, which, as she notes, reflect her personality, she also long has understood the potential of the home-meal-replacement market.

As the original chef for Boston Chicken, she helped create the concept that eventually would whet the industry's HMR appetite. And after four years of operating her own catering company, she is intimately familiar with consumer tastes and consumer kitchens. In conceiving the New England Soup Factory five years ago, Druker and Brophy created an upscale quick-serve restaurant and takeout shop offering a wide array of freshly prepared salads, entrees and desserts as well as more than 100 soups. The pair now have restaurants in Boston, Brookline and Newton, Mass., and a new production facility under construction. Sales are projected to be \$5 million in 2000, and Druker envisions more locations and a retail line of products ahead.

Title: executive chef, New England Soup Factory

Birth date: March 16, 1964

Hometown: born in Chicago but grew up in Newton, Mass.

Education: Johnson & Wales University, Providence, R.I.
Career highlights: serving as original chef for Boston Chicken concept; making appearances on the New England Food Network and Dining Around, receiving "Best of Boston" award from Boston magazine in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999; creating five-part television series on soups for Johnson & Wales; owning and operating three New England Soup Factory restaurants.

What was your inspiration for the New England Soup Factory?

I have always loved soup and my [catering] clients always asked me to make it for them, even before the whole Seinfeld thing — the infamous Soup Nazi episode. I create soups whose flavors are unmatched, but we also need ed as many meal opportunities as possible, so we have entrees, sandwiches, salads and desserts. I wanted to create a quality quick-serve experience.

Who is your target market?

The food appeals to all. It's a bit avant-garde. But, of course, the trend for 2000 is people demanding higher-quality food. That's what we do. That's why our slogan is "Feed Your Body Well." For instance, I make a pumpkin, green and cranberry soup that's like taking every aspect of fall and putting it in a bowl. I try to combine memories with food. I also make a purée of root vegetable soup with parsnips, sweet potatoes, turnips, nutmeg. When you

Marjorie Druker, executive chef at New England Soup Factory along with her husband, Paul, makes more than 300 gallons of soup daily.

CHEF'S TIPS

- To make great lobster stock, cook lobster bones in a full mix of white wine, aromatics and tomato paste. Then pulverize the entire mixture and strain it through a very fine chinois.
- To keep flavor from cooking out of soups, add herbs and other flavorings, like balsamic vinegar, lemon oil and cognac, at the end.

eat the first bite, you feel it throughout your entire body. And I took tomato and rice and changed it to yellow tomato and rice, which made it more interesting, and I hate to say the word "yupified," but I will.

Many of your soups are quite unusual. How do you create them?

I take a meal and combine it in a bowl. I took lobster Newburg and created it into a soup. I'm a natural with research and development. I also read quite a bit and do a lot of research, so it's very easy for me. So I'll think of a meal, like portobello mushrooms and steak with potatoes, and make it into a soup.

Soup is usually thought of as a winter specialty. What happens in the summer?

It's definitely different in the summertime. We don't have the same amount of business. But we make gazpacho, salads, sandwiches and desserts. I make delicious Southern fried chicken and real country potato salad. My food is based on how people live their lives. In the summer, when it's hot and sweaty, I think about what would feel good in my body. I like a great shrimp salad or a honeydew soup with coriander. Soup moves to the back as a sales item, but I do make things like a mango and lime soup, which is like eating pure silk.

What is your day like?

I'm usually here around 9 a.m. It used to be 5 a.m. I check in with everyone and go to soup making, inventing, tweaking and working with my three home-meal replacement chefs. I spend most of my time in Brookline, but I do travel from store to store to see the kitchens and work with the front of the house staff. I'm a nurturer by nature, so I like to work with the staff.

How did you get interested in cooking?

I've been cooking since I was 3 years old. I've always had an intense fascination with foods and colors and flavors. I recently went to a psychic counselor, who told me that in a past life I cooked for kings and queens, and I said, "Oh, I still do!" My mom went back to work when I was 12, and I cooked and shopped and made fantastic meals. My parents said, "You're going to be a chef." In high school I worked for a gourmet takeout shop, which was my first



taste of home meal replacement. I've worked in hotels and institutional kitchens and for Bread & Circus, a local grocery chain, teaching people how to cook with whole foods, while getting [my catering business] the Traveling Gourmet off the ground. After Johnson & Wales, I opened Boston Chicken when I was 20. I developed the menu and recipes and then went to Cape Cod, where I worked for Pasta Perfecto and made pasta. I had the Traveling Gourmet for four years and then opened the New England Soup Factory.

What is the check average at the New England Soup Factory?

We have an \$8 to \$10 check average. Sales are about \$30,000 per week at Newton, and sales are projected to be \$5 million in 2000 among all three stores. It's been a tremendous amount of hard work and satisfaction. We love what we do and the people we've surrounded ourselves with. We have about 85 to 100 employees. In the Boston store we have a high customer count but a low check average, so we're trying to increase it. We serve about 650 customers a day in Boston, compared with about 375 customers a day in Brookline.

What's your favorite soup?

I have two favorites. The Greek orzo, lemon and chicken is the most simple soup, but it's like drinking hot lemonade. It's got an intense chicken stock with orzo, chicken, lemon and spinach at the end. It gives you a feeling of well-being. And [the other favorite is] eggplant Parmigiana because it tastes like eggplant Parmigiana.

What's your best-selling soup?

Chicken vegetable. We sell about 80 gallons a day throughout all three stores. And lobster Newburg, of which we sell about 60 gallons a day.