



Pros share secrets of great soups

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Matthew Gamache's soup secret is a crushed bay leaf and a dash of white pepper.

Ian Parent uses starchy vegetables to thicken the simmering mixture and often substitutes olive oil because his wife doesn't eat butter. Mary Phelps packs her potions with vegetables. And if Devin Byrnes has a sandwich or entree he finds inspiring, you'll likely see a soup version of it in his shop a few days later.

These are soup makers, and more than 60 years of collective experience have made them wise.

So as National Soup Month draws to a close and temperatures drop to bone-chilling single digits, we asked people who make soup professionally on Cape Cod and the SouthCoast to share some of their secrets so home cooks can turn "simmer for two hours" into "where did you get this amazing soup?"

And if you have any soup tips or recipes — whether you're a sandwich shop owner or an avid home cook — please e-mail them to gfriss@capecodonline.com and we'll share them with your neighbors in upcoming food pages.

Matthew Gamache, owner, Courtyard Restaurant, 270 Huttleston Ave. (Route 6), Fairhaven

International cuisine may be catching on in a big way, but at the breakfast-and-lunch eatery Matthew Gamache has owned for 16 years, the basics are still the big sellers: Chicken rice, clam chowder and kale are crowd favorites.

"If I don't make chicken rice one day, I have to make it the next," says Gamache, who sells the homemade soups for \$2.50 to \$3 per cup.

Gamache says it's the ingredients you don't see that make his soups sing. In his chicken rice (he jotted the recipe, from memory, on the back of a paper place mat) Gamache uses one-eighth of a green pepper diced so small you might not even see it once the soup is cooked. In almost all his soups, he uses a pinch of white pepper.

"You don't want so much that it tastes like pepper. You just use a little as a flavor enhancer," Gamache says. "My explanation is that the pepper opens up the taste buds and allows you to enjoy the rest of the flavors more. I also use a bay leaf, ground up."

Courtyard Restaurant's Chicken Soup

1 1/2 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast, diced

1 large onion, diced

2 celery stalks, diced

1/8 green pepper, diced very small

1 1/2 carrots, diced

1 pinch white pepper, to taste

1 heaping tablespoon chicken soup base (not bouillon)

1 cup rice or pasta

- Add raw chicken to one gallon boiling water.
- Add pinch of white pepper or more, to taste.
- Add soup base. Buy one that has chicken as the first ingredient.
- Add dry rice or pasta, such as pasta or stars.
- Saute vegetables in oil or butter and add to soup pot.
- Cook at a low simmer for one to two hours. When rice is tender, soup is done.

Ian Parent, owner, La Petite France, 349 Main St., Hyannis

Ian Parent wooed his wife-to-be with soup.

He first started making it 18 years ago when he worked for La Petite France's founder, Lucien Digoanni, and "my wife, well we weren't married then, said, 'You made this?' and the rest was history," Parent says.

Parent's wife, Heidi Parent, plays an important role in the soup-making tale: She doesn't like butter, so Parent experimented with substituting olive oil in many of the four soups he makes each day. "My chicken veggie has olive oil in it and it's amazing," he says.

Because Parent cooks rotisserie chickens regularly for the shop, he freezes the bones and makes his own soup stock. But new bases with reduced sodium and no MSG additive make it easy to make soup even if you don't want to boil bones for hours. "You can even buy veal demi-glace, which is the beginning of many great sauces and soups."

To get started on most soups, Parent sautes a mirepoix of chopped onions, carrots and celery with garlic in olive oil, adds beef base and more olive oil, then adds water to taste.

"To taste" is very important in soup, Parent says, urging cooks to taste as they go because you can always add more but you can't take away seasonings. Parent sautes his seasonings into the mirepoix at the start, but fresh herbs go in the pot at the last minute or, better yet, into the bowl as the soup is served.

Parent decides to share a corn chowder recipe that is made with creamed corn. He has made it so often the recipe is almost a muscle memory for him and he has to stop to think about it as he recites.

La Petite France's Corn Chowder

1 large white onion, diced

4 to 5 cubed, unpeeled red bliss potatoes, cooked until still a little hard as if you were making potato salad

1/2 pound bacon or salt pork (may omit if making a vegetarian version)

4 cups frozen corn kernels

2 15 1/2-ounce cans creamed corn

4 cups of half-and-half or milk

Salt and pepper, to taste

Cornstarch slurry, if needed, to thicken (recipe on cornstarch box)

- Saute onions in light olive oil or an olive-vegetable oil blend. Extra virgin olive oil has too much flavor, Parent says, and can affect the soup's flavor.
- Saute bacon or salt pork with onions. If using salt pork for flavor, remove chunks after the saute. If using bacon, crumble in with onions. Parent likes Irish bacon because it's a little smokier and saltier.
- When onions are almost translucent, add frozen corn to saute pan and cook until corn is still a little crisp.
- Transfer saute mix to top of double boiler or soup pot and add potatoes. The starchy potatoes will help thicken the chowder, while the peels keep pieces from crumbling altogether.
- Add half-and-half or milk. Milk saves calories but half-and-half thickens chowder without using a roux (flour cooked in butter as a base for a cream soup or sauce.) To avoid using butter, you can also thicken with a slurry of four tablespoons cornstarch heated into one cup water.
- Add creamed corn.
- Place chowder pot over boiling water and bring to simmer, stirring constantly. Using a double boiler with its indirect heat prevents milk from scorching.

Devin Byrnes, owner of Destination Soups, 141 Union St., New Bedford.

It's not surprising that Devin Byrnes ended up owning a soup shop.

"My mother was always fond of soups and she would make a big pot of soup to carry us through the week," Byrnes recalls. "I started working as a dishwasher in high school and I learned some soup chops from different chefs. Anywhere I went I became the soup guy. I learned at Not Your Average Joe's in Dartmouth, where I worked for three years.

"I got promoted to sautes from pizza and part of it was to create two unusual soups a day. They didn't have to be totally crazy but couldn't be chicken noodle and tomato every day. It expanded my whole base (of thinking) in terms of what can go into a soup."

Byrnes says most leftovers can go into a soup. Thanksgiving is a prime example, starting with the turkey carcass and adding everything right down to leftover stuffing, which can be cut into small squares and added at the end like croutons.

"It's almost like a liquid turkey pot pie," he says. "Pretty much anything can be turned into a soup. If you have a protein and enough vegetables, you can make a soup."

Around Thanksgiving time, Byrnes did a creamy butternut squash soup with ground turkey, apples and sage.

"When I cooked the butternut squash, I added apple cider. That was really popular. And a lot of people really dig kale down here. I did curried lentil with kale and sweet potatoes as a vegetarian soup."

Byrnes says starchy veggies like squash create a creamy consistency with very little added cream.

"Try to become sort of a sponge when you go out," Byrnes advises. "Get ideas from menus, inspiration from people who do know more about food."

"You'll constantly see marriages in ingredients even if you don't have a great palate."

After writing the following recipe to share, Byrnes decided to feature it as a special at the shop today.

Destination Soups' Curried Lentil, Sweet Potato and Kale

2 medium-sized carrots, finely diced

1 large red pepper, finely diced

1 large white onion, finely diced

3 pieces celery, finely diced

2 cloves garlic, finely diced

Pinch of salt

1 teaspoon EACH of cumin, cinnamon, nutmeg and paprika

2 teaspoons curry powder (I use a yellow curry)

Oil for saute pan

1 pound lentils

2 large peeled sweet potatoes, cut very thin (I julienne them)

Water

1/2 head of finely chopped kale (I like the curly kale but collards or other similar green could be used.)

1 can of coconut milk

- Cook first 11 ingredients in soup pot with olive oil until veggies begin to sweat (soften and moisten without browning) and spice mix begins to stick.
- Add 1 pound of lentils.
- Cover with water, Cook on high for 15 to 20 minutes until soup begins to a light boil.
- Add sweet potato. Let soup come back up to a near boil, add kale.
- Let soup come to a light boil until lentils and sweet potatoes are soft.
- Adjust seasoning, maybe add more salt.
- Add 1 can of coconut milk.

Mary Phelps, co-owner, Earthly Delights, 15 West Bay Road, Osterville

In 25 years of making soup, Mary Phelps has learned a few things, including: Stir a lot to blend flavors; add fresh herbs at the end; and make it hearty. Phelps says chicken with sweet potatoes, peanuts and peanut butter is a popular choice, as is wild mushroom, when it's packed with different kinds of mushrooms.

"When you have self-serve soup like we do, you have to really pack it with vegetables or they'll be gone after the first customer or two," Phelps says. "People like stuff in their soup. It's \$2.75 a cup so we want them to get their money's worth."

Phelps makes three soups a day, favoring hearty selections — such as split pea, chicken and barley, and vegetarian stew.

"I always start with onions, celery, bay leaves and a little bit of thyme. If it's going to be a real vegetable soup, I add carrots for the color. Elbows and raviolis tend to break up. But sometimes I take casseroles — like chicken penne or chop suey — and throw them in soup for new flavor."

More great news? "Soups tend not to be fattening," Phelps says.

Earthy Delights' Chicken Vegetable Stew

1/2 cup EACH onion and celery, chopped

Bay leaf and thyme, to taste

2 carrots, cut in big chunks

8 cups chicken stock

2 cups cooked chicken breast, cubed

1 to 2 cups zucchini

2 cups spinach

1 12.5-ounce can tomatoes (I use Muir Glen Organic, diced)

1/2 cup short brown rice or leftover rice

1/2 cup white wine OR 1/4 cup balsamic vinegar

1 bag frozen peas

- Saute onion and celery in soup pot with olive oil.
- Add everything but peas and chicken.
- Cook about an hour over low simmer, adding peas and chicken near the end.
- Garnish with a little Parmesan cheese, if desired.

BEAT THE PROS

Since soup is on the menu today, it seemed appropriate to share some news about a soup contest you can enter.

New England Country Soup, a Vermont company that makes all-natural, ready-to-serve soups that come in microwavable pouches, has thrown down the gauntlet.

In The Soup Challenge, home cooks are invited to match their scratch-cooked versions against the brand's similar varieties for both taste and nutrition. Ten finalists will be chosen for the final matchup March 5 in Boston, with bragging rights and a Martha's Vineyard weekend getaway at stake.

You can find New England Country Soup on the shelves at Stop & Shop, as well as other markets. Details of the contest, which has a Feb. 13 deadline, can be found at www.soupchallenge.com.

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