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It's cold outside, warm up with soup

A good bowl of broth or bisque brings comfort, memories

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For the soup-loving fans of "Seinfeld," the Soup Nazi was a figure of awe, a man who could dish up such exquisite liquid pleasure that people would grovel for it.

The "Seinfeld" writers picked the right dish for their quirky plot, for an Appetizer Nazi or a Dessert Nazi simply wouldn't cut the mustard. Soup lovers know a good soup is worth even kowtowing with an irascible chef like the Soup Nazi.

The thing with soup is the broth is firmly enmeshed in the nurturing fabric of every culture. Be it chicken soup or escarole, we all remember how our mother's or grandmother's soup could cure most ills.

"Soup makes you feel better when you don't feel well," said Trudi Nowlin, Wuesthoff Health System food and nutrition director. "It very often is the only food people will eat when they feel sick. It's feel-good food."

Some doctoral candidate in psychology must have explored the emotional connections we ladle along with our soups.

"I believe the warmth of soup is soothing, which makes us feel better both physically and mentally," said Wuesthoff Health System dietician Kelly Aleman. "I also believe the soothing nature of soup brings back fond memories of our childhood."

Aleman has a soft spot for certain soups.

"I remember when I came in from playing outside on a rainy or cold winter day, my mom would have hot tomato or chicken noodle soup ready for me, which always made me feel better," she said.

Not only does it bring back good vibes, but it's also good for you.

"Most broth type soups are very healthy, low in sodium and light on the calories, another reason people eat soups when they aren't feeling well," said Aleman.

Neta Harris knows soup is quintessential comfort food.

Harris, of Titusville, was born in Missouri and lived in Arkansas before moving to Florida, bringing with her the recipes she learned from her family.

"I was making biscuits from scratch when I was 5 years old," she said.

In her family circle, Harris is known for two special soups.

"My turkey chili is my secret weapon with my family," she said. "They have to do something nice for

me to make it, and my Easy Cheesy Chicken Soup is to die for."

Harris got the recipe from a cousin in Piggott, Ark. One of the ingredients Harris uses for the soup is a deli-cooked chicken.

That's smart thinking, said Chef Deborah Lindsay of Keiser University's Capital Culinary Institute.

"I cook for two, and one of those rotisserie chickens can make us three or four meals, and you can bet one of them is going to be soup," Lindsay said.

Lindsay, whose first job was making the soups at Green Turtle Market, also will tell you good ingredients are vital for a good soup.

"The key to good soups is to start with a good base with lots of flavor," she said. "The foundation of a good soup is a good stock."

Canned soups, while convenient, have not helped soup's cause.

"People no longer know what real homemade soup is anymore," Lindsay said. "The problem with canned soups is that they tend to add a lot of the cheap stuff, like chemical emulsifiers, and not enough of the good stuff like meat and vegetables.

"You can make soup out of anything," said Lindsay.

A case in point is Harris' Clean-Out-the-Refrigerator Soup.

"If you're brave enough, you can use anything in the refrigerator, as long as you have enough items to make it interesting," Harris said.

Harris once concocted a surprisingly tasty soup with old spaghetti.

"You have to think outside the box," she said.

A great chef can turn something as unassuming as tomato soup into an elegant extravagance.

"To me, soup is what makes a great chef," said Alex Litras, owner of Café Margaux and Ulysses' Prime Steakhouse in Cocoa Village. "You take it to the next level with the soups and the sauces. Soup challenges you."

At Margaux, patrons rave about executive chef Erol Tugrul's Roasted Tomato and Greek Basil Bisque, on the menu for 10 years.

The recipe is at the Café Margaux Web page (www.cafemargaux.com), but customers admit they just can't make it taste as good as Tugrul's.

The reality is Tugrul's soup is never the same, changed by the ingredients the chef chooses for the day.

"He's in a near-constant state of improvement, so Erol doesn't necessarily do the same thing every time," Litras said.

Tugrul often uses Margaux's monthly wine dinners to test new soups, such as his Cream of Roasted Elephant Garlic Soup with St. Andre Triple Crème Brie and Fried Leeks or his Sweet Potato Vichyssoise with Crystallized Ginger, Roasted Almonds and Mango Crème Frache.

A good soup can be easy to make. For example, chef Julien Lee, owner of Vina Belle restaurant in Lake Washington, can rattle off the recipe of lobster bisque in a few seconds.

"First, pour a little bit olive oil on a fry pan and put in Italian herb, onion and carrot and stir and fry it with salt and pepper for about two minutes," she said.

"Second, put in lobster meat and fry it and then pour a half glass of white wine. Finally, pour lobster broth and put in a little bit raw white cream and a spoon of tomato paste and then boil it."

And time -- the enemy of most dishes -- doesn't affect most soups.

"Soup gets better and better with each passing day," Lindsay said.

Tips for making great soup

Chef Deborah Lindsay of Keiser University's Capital Culinary Institute offers the following tips for making extraordinary soup:

- Begin with a flavorful liquid base -- stock, broth or vegetable purée. It is a neutral canvas ready for creativity with seasonings.
- Keep homemade stocks clear. Bring ingredients to a boil, skim off froth, and turn down the heat to maintain a lazy bubble. Only salt at the end.
- For a simple, economical meal, enrich and extend canned stock with fresh vegetables and aromatics, and leftover cooked pasta or rice, protein and a final garnish for a homemade creation.
- Avoid over-salted store brands (check the label) so your flavors shine though.
- Cut vegetables and meat into small, spoonable pieces. They cook or reheat faster, look nicer in the bowl and are easier to eat.