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Soup Sisters get cooking

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It's a new kind of Soup Kitchen.

Toronto's first Soup Sisters, dozens of them, have piled into Dish Cooking Studio. They are chatting and bonding as they chop and stir their way toward the goal of preparing 200 servings of soup for charity.

"As women, most of us nurture through food," Sharon Hapton says amid the hubbub. "I've always taken care of my family and friends with soup."

Hapton, a Calgary optician, is the founder of Soup Sisters. When her nest emptied out, she directed her instincts to nurture and nourish toward her "sisters in crisis" at the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter.

"I hit the most giant nurture void of my life – my kids were in university," Hapton recalls.

With the help of friends, she launched Soup Sisters last year, on her 50th birthday.

The non-profit group took off fast in Calgary. The Toronto wing (at Dish) was launched on March 3, exactly one year later. Next in Hapton's sights is Vancouver.

Soup Sisters is on its way to becoming the grassroots, cross-Canada network that Hapton envisions. The format is simple: Get a group together, at least a dozen people. Book a soup-making date. (If you don't have a group, they can match you with one.)

Recipes, ingredients, pans, utensils and containers are provided, and a chef is on hand to help. The soup is poured into one-litre glass containers. The evening costs \$45 per person and includes a pre-made soup, salad, bread, and two glasses of wine. You leave with a keepsake tote. Check www.soupsisters.org for details (and recipes).

In Toronto, soup-making sessions are held at Dish, on Dupont St. The soup is delivered to Interval House, the country's oldest shelter for women and children fleeing abuse and domestic violence.

Lesley Ackrill, executive manager of Interval House, tells the Sisters their soup donations make women at the shelter feel important.

Celebrity chef Christine Cushing, soup coach for the evening, reminisces about teaching a cooking class at a women's shelter early in her career and her pleasure at discovering how well the women bonded in the kitchen.

Soup Sisters is about networking as well as nurturing. For the Toronto launch, Hapton collected a crowd of friends and friends of friends to cook, about 45 of them, some high-profile.

"My sister does this in Calgary," says Sandy Pittana, chopping a mound of carrots, yet looking every inch the style guru she is.

Pittana, a CityLine guest host, and globe-trotting Toronto foodie Mary Luz Mejia are toiling together over a pot of pasta and bean soup.

Four other groups are working on their soups: carrot and coconut; mushroom, bean and barley; chunky chicken Creole with ancient grains; lentils with sausage.



Stylist Sandy Pittana and foodie Mary Luz Mejia work at pasta and bean soup. About 45 women gathered for the Soup Sisters Toronto launch.

SUSAN SAMPSON/TORONTO STAR

While everything's simmering, they get to sit down and savour Cushing's contribution, spicy jamaican pumpkin soup prepared in advance.

Sisterhood has its rewards. But if you're a man, don't despair.

Men are making soup, too, thanks to the Broth Brothers. Since their launch in September 2009, the Brothers have been sending soup to The Doorway, an agency that helps youth get off the streets.

The catch: Their only branch is in Calgary – so far.