

Winnipeg Free Press - PRINT EDITION

Soup Sisters cook up comfort food for women in shelters, nourish their own souls

Bowled over

By: Alison Gillmor

Posted: 03/20/2013 1:00 AM | Comments: 0g



ALEX ZIMMER [Enlarge Image](#)

Soup's on: Hapton (third from right) with (from left) Bronstein, Malamud, Fairmont Hotel chef Jeremy Langemann and Zimmer.

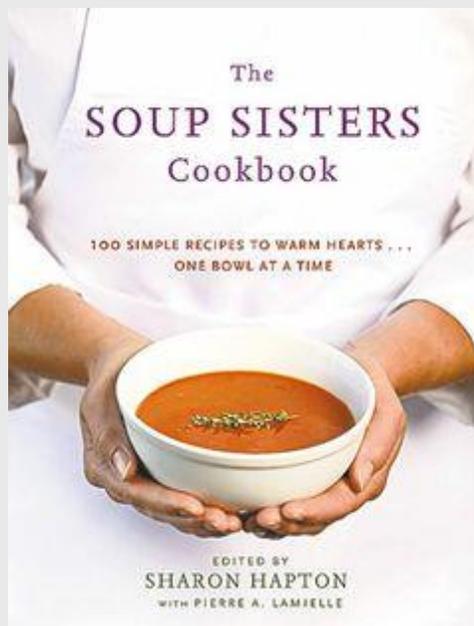
"SOUP is good food," says the old advertising slogan. It's good to make and good to eat. But it's even better to give. And that's where Soup Sisters comes in. It's good to make and good to eat. But it's even better to give. And that's where Soup Sisters comes in.

A grassroots non-profit organization, Soup Sisters was launched in Calgary in March 2009 by Sharon Hapton. Since then, more than 7,500 volunteers across Canada have cooked up more than 100,000 containers of nurturing, nourishing soup. The soups, from good old-fashioned chicken noodle to hearty minestrone, go to women and children affected by domestic abuse and family violence.



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Cast iron cannellini and kale soup. (PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)



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A new Winnipeg chapter, started by Miriam Bronstein, Sandi Malamud and Harriet Zimmer, is partnering with The Fairmont Winnipeg hotel to supply monthly soup donations for the women and children who live at Osborne House, our city's largest women's shelter.

At the inaugural event on March 10, founder Hapton talked about Soup Sisters as a natural extension of the urge to make soup for a friend in need. "It's a very tangible gesture," Hapton says. "And it clearly lets people know they matter."

It's a simple idea: Soup Sisters participants, which include women and men (a.k.a. Broth Brothers), are charged \$50 per person to cover the cost of all ingredients, the kitchen facilities, the chef facilitator and the kitchen staff. The soup makers get a light supper of soup, bread and salad, along with a couple of glasses of wine. But what really matters are the gallons of soup for the shelters.

On that first night, the 43 participants made six 15-litre batches of soup, picked from a reliable roster of 45 recipes. Using fresh, healthy ingredients, the soups are hard-working and wholesome. Kids love hamburger soup and chicken noodle, but there are also spiced creoles and vegetarian options. These "meals in a bowl" can

help shelters offset their operating costs by 18 to 20 per cent.

Events take place once a month and anyone can register to participate at www.soupsisters.org. Participants include office groups, book clubs and birthday groups. The first seven events in Winnipeg are already sold out. Bronstein was inspired to start the Winnipeg chapter after a visit to her adult daughter in Ottawa, where she tagged along to a Soup Sisters event. "Making soup and drinking wine with a bunch of women is great fun," says Bronstein. "But the really amazing thing was when a woman from the shelter spoke. She jolted us into reality."

The first Winnipeg Soup Sisters evening was sociable and loud, with lots of chopping, stirring, laughing and talking in the vast restaurant kitchen. Fairmont chef Jeremy Langemann was there to help out, along with a very patient staff.

After the soup was made, participants wrote out labels by hand, including all the ingredients, as well as messages of hope and encouragement. It would be easier to use a computer to print out the labels, of course, but for the Soup Sisters, the personal touch is important.

"I'm used to fundraising and doing things from a distance. I think giving back with your two hands is really meaningful," says Bronstein.

The Soup Sisters organization has also produced a bestselling cookbook, which includes soup recipes from Canadian celebrity chefs like Bonnie Stern, Lucy Waverman, Anna Olson and Elizabeth Baird, as well as Soup Sisters' many volunteers.

The book is a tribute to the warmth and comfort of soup, and to the way it brings people together. Here are two recipes that live up to the Soup Sisters' mandate to "warm hearts, one bowl at a time."

Cast iron cannellini and kale soup

1 onion, diced

60 ml (1/4 cup) olive oil

12 cloves garlic, sliced

1.5 l (6 cups) chopped kale leaves

250 g (1/2 lb) wine-and-cheese sausage or sweet Italian sausage, diced

125 ml (1/2 cup) white wine

2 l (8 cups) chicken or pork stock

500 ml (2 cups) canned diced tomatoes with their juices

125 ml (1/2 cup) cooked cannellini beans (drained and rinsed if canned)

5 fresh basil leaves, chopped

1 sprig fresh thyme, leaves only

Salt and pepper to taste

Extra-virgin olive oil for garnish

Freshly grated Parmesan cheese for garnish

In a large cast iron pot over medium heat, sauté the onion in the oil until onion is softened.

Stir in the garlic. Sauté until the edges of the garlic start turning a light brown colour and the mixture starts to feel tacky on the bottom of the pot when you stir it with a wooden spoon.

Add the kale and sausage. Sauté until the kale wilts, about 3 minutes.

Add the wine and cook until the boozy smell disappears, about 3 minutes.

Add the stock, tomatoes, beans, basil and thyme. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce heat to medium-low.

Simmer uncovered, until the sausage is cooked and the flavours have blended, about 20 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Take the pot to the table and serve family style, drizzling each large hearty bowlful with olive oil and a

sprinkling of Parmesan.

Makes about 6 servings.

-- *Connie DeSousa and John Jackson, chefs, Charcut House, Calgary (from The Soup Sisters Cookbook)*

Tester's notes: A real meal in a bowl, with lots of full-bodied flavour. I love the resolute use of garlic -- but be sure not to burn or it will become bitter. I used sweet Italian sausages, removed from their casings and crumbled. Cannellini beans, also called white kidney beans, suit this robust soup, but you could swap in any white bean you have on hand. If using dried cannellini beans, you should pick over the beans, discarding any discoloured ones, soak overnight in plenty of water, drain and rinse, and then cook in unsalted water until tender, about 45-90 minutes, depending on freshness of the beans.

Thai-spiced lime and sweet potato

1 leek, white and pale green parts only, washed and sliced

3 cloves garlic, crushed

15 ml (1 tbsp) olive oil

6 carrots, peeled and diced

3 sweet potatoes, peeled and diced

5 ml (1 tsp) Thai seasoning (see tester's note)

1.5 l (6 cups) chicken or vegetable broth

1 x 398-ml (14-oz) can unsweetened coconut milk

Zest and juice of 1 lime

Salt to taste

In a large pot over medium heat, sauté the leek and garlic in the oil until the leek is softened.

Stir in the carrots, sweet potatoes and Thai seasoning.

Add the stock. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce the heat to medium-low.

Simmer, uncovered, until the sweet potatoes are tender, about 30 minutes.

Puree the soup until smooth. Add the coconut milk. Reheat over medium heat and add the lime zest and juice, and salt to taste.

Ladle up a steamy cup of creamy, sweet soup.

Makes about 6 servings.

-- *Maggie Serpa-Francoeur, Soup Sister (from The Soup Sisters Cookbook)*

Tester's notes: This very easy soup has wonderful flavours. Thai seasoning is a pre-mixed blend that can be found in some supermarkets and specialty stores. I didn't have any on hand, so I just slightly increased the amount of garlic and lime, added some minced fresh ginger along with the leek and a little dried hot pepper with the stock. In North America, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes are usually called yams. (And true yams are something entirely different -- it's complicated.)

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