

DINING

Zoup! ladles up some of the best hot soup in town

By **RENÉE SKOGLUND**
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We all remember those grilled cheese and tomato soup days of our childhood. And you know ... sometimes, there's nothing more comforting in life than a bowl of hot soup.

Zoup!, which made its debut in the area just three years ago, recently opened a Northville restaurant, its fourth location.

The place is busy. Let's say there's a lot of ladle-dipping going on.

"Lunch is busy, but dinners are going on strong," said Eric Ersher, who owns the chain along with his partner, David Elias.

"They have good soup and a good variety. It's fresh. You always find one or two soups you like, if not more," said customer Ken Gold of Farmington Hills, who polished off a bowl of Smooth Tomato.

All soups come with a hunk of sourdough or multigrain bread and are served in 8-ounce to 32-ounce portions. With the bread, 12 ounces of soup is plenty. They also serve salads.

Choices, choices, choices

If you visited a Zoup! location seven days a week, it would take you more than half a year to sample all 200 varieties the company cooks up in its Ferndale-based kitchen. Each Zoup! location serves 12 different soups each day, and the selections are constantly rotated. We're talking a soup lover's heaven.

"We make a lot of soup. We're getting good at it," said Ersher in a classic understatement.

The top-selling Zoup! soup is Chicken Potpie, and the Observer's taste-testing entourage (a reporter, editor and photographer) agreed. The soup was thick, almost a stew, creamy and filled with vegetables. The crumbled pie-crust topping made it even more special. We gave it a

four-spoon rating. It was comfort food at its best. I called it an "edible pillow."

The El Grandé Chili also received four spoons, as did the Smooth Tomato, which was clear and lightly spiced. The Firecracker Shrimp and the Clam Chowder received three spoons and the Cajun Chicken & Sausage Gumbo three and a half.

Zoup! also offers a daily selection of low-fat, vegetarian or dairy-free soups.

Getting started

Ersher and Elias, formerly in the wholesale spice business, came up with the concept for Zoup! in 1997. "We went through a lot of back doors in restaurants and saw what kind of soups they served," said Ersher. "The consensus was that really good soup was hard to find."

A group of family and friends met every Saturday morning to sample the chef's weekly batch of 15 new soups. Ersher wouldn't say what recipes were tossed from the pot, but most recipes were keepers.

"We keep them, tweak them or kill them," he said.

There are no industrial-size pots in Zoup!'s kitchen. All soups

are made in small batches then quick-chilled in an ice-water bath to preserve freshness and "marry the flavors." It is gently double-boiled before serving.

"Quality is what Zoup! is all about," said Ersher. "We're really focused on being better than the other guy."

Zoup! offers take-home containers, frozen HomeZoup! in single-servings and microwavable containers. What's best, you can order and pay on-line by visiting www.zoup.com. Or, you can have Zoup! e-mail you with their daily menu and a link to their order form.

One last thing — dessert. There's Apple Brown Betty, Mud Pie, Rice Pudding, cobblers, brownies and cookies.

Zoup!

20065 Haggerty Road
(between Seven and Eight Mile), Northville; Phone: (248) 374-1000, fax: (248) 374-5663

Menu: Soup, soup and more soup; salads; desserts

Prices: \$3.95-\$9.95

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday; noon to 7 p.m. Sunday

Seats 32, no smoking.

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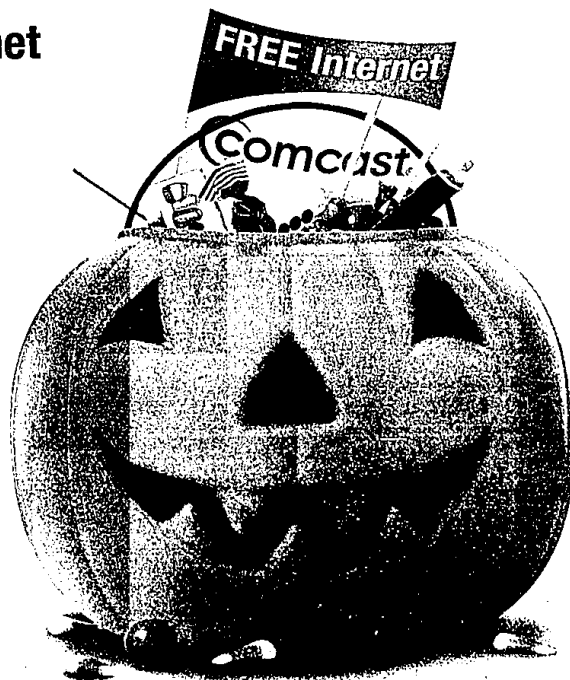
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