

Zoup!'s on

Expanding restaurant chain specializes in soup to go or stay

By SHARON DARGAY
STAFF WRITER

It's hard to imagine eating chicken pot pie without a fork.

But spoon your way through a bowl of creamy chicken soup, loaded with vegetables and homemade crust, at Zoup! in Southfield, and you'll never go back to the traditional oven-baked version.

Chicken pot pie soup is a favorite and a fixture on the eatery's dozen soups-a-day menu that draws from more than 200 soup, stew and chili recipes made daily at Zoup!'s Ferndale headquarters.

"The philosophy when we lay out the soups is to try to offer something for everyone," says co-owner Eric Ersher, of Sylvan Lake, who founded Zoup! two years ago with David Elias, of Farmington Hills.

A recent menu included steak soup, four different chicken soups, two seafood soups, a chili and four vegetarian versions. The Chicken Pot Pie, thick, rich, but not overly creamy, lured me back to the restaurant for another bowl a few days after I first sampled it. The Mexican Chicken, a combination of corn, rice, green chili, jalapeno, green peppers, chicken and spices in a tomato-based soup, delivered just the right amount of zest. But the Caribbean Seafood Chowder, loaded with seafood and vegetables in a thin soup, was too fishy for my taste.

"We have chicken pot pie every day. We have to, by demand. The others rotate every day. We try to track favorites. Our customers very regularly tell us what they want and we adjust the menu to put them on more often. We found our customer base is pretty diverse."

And it's growing. Ersher and Elias will open their third Zoup! location in Troy next month. Their second eatery opened last year in the Renaissance Center in Detroit.

Zoup!

On the menu: A dozen different soups, stews and chili creations daily from an assortment of more than 200 recipes. Each soup comes with a hunk of multi-grain or sourdough bread. Beverages include soda pop, iced tea, hot tea, coffee, lemonade and bottled water. Cookies, brownies, mud pie, berry cobbler, apple brown Betty and rice pudding are available for dessert. The Troy location, opening in March, also will serve salads.

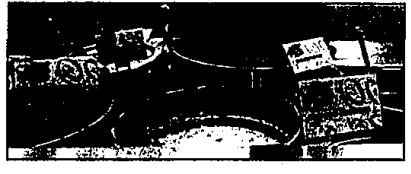
Cost: Soup prices range from about \$3.25-\$4.25 for an eight-ounce cup, \$4.50-\$6.50 for a 16 ounce bowl and \$6.75-\$10.75 for a 32-ounce container.

Hours and locations:

■ Southfield — 11 a.m.-8 p.m., Monday through Saturday at 29177 Northwestern Highway, just north of 12 Mile Road in the Franklin Plaza Shopping Center. Phone (248) 799-2800 or fax (248) 799-2882.

■ Detroit — 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Monday through Saturday, in the Towers 200 food court at The Renaissance Center. Phone (313) 567-7500 or fax (313) 567-7514.

Ordering: Zoup! posts the daily menu for each location on its web site at www.zoup.com. It accepts on-line orders and payment, as well as fax orders.



The 2,200-square-foot space at 2873 Maple, just east of Coolidge, will seat about 25 people, about half of the available seating at Zoup! in Southfield. Customers will be able to order from the Troy menu in person, by fax or over the Internet, as they can from the other Zoup! sites. And they'll choose from 12 different soups daily, including low-fat, non-dairy, spicy and vegetarian, a variety of beverages and desserts.

"The whole area there really is changing from light industrial to a higher end retail. There's new residential coming. It's a changing area. We're really excited about it," Ersher noted.

"We're going to introduce something new in Troy called Good Greens, which is our salad component. We listen to our customers. There have been requests for salads and we think they'll round out the concept."

Fast, nutritious and quality define Zoup!'s philosophy. Ersher says his company is part of a growing food trend called "quick casual."

"It's sort of like fast food for adults, but it turns on a higher quality product," he explained. Zoup! makes its soups in small batches using only fresh vegetables and no MSG. It quickly chills the cooked soups to refrigeration temperature before transporting them to Southfield and Detroit, where they are heated in a double boiler.

"One of the benefits to our



Soup entrepreneurs: Zoup! partners David Elias (left) and Eric Ersher sold wholesale spices before opening their growing chain of soup-only restaurants.

method is that the soups are not kept hot for hours and hours, because if they are and you're not careful, they continue to cook," he said.

"We won't cut corners, even if it's the most labor intensive, expensive way to do it. If those are the results we're looking for, that's the way we do it."

Ersher, Elias, their wives, family members and friends tested and tasted soups every week-end for a year before the pair opened Zoup!. They hired a chef

to create and refine recipes. And they quit their wholesale spice business to manage their growing chain of soup-only eateries.

"We're always adding new soups and we're always trying things our customers suggest," Ersher and Elias describe themselves as "soup fanatics."

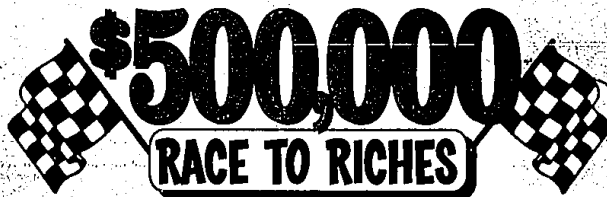
While peddling spices, they got a chance to "look in the back doors of a lot of restaurants" and noticed that their favorite food was an under-served segment of the industry.

They vowed to do a better job.

"Both of us are pretty healthy eaters and we just like soup, but only the good stuff," Ersher noted.

Neither can pass up a bowl of two of Zoup! soup and are likely to order a few varieties at a sitting.

"Soup is a great way to try different flavors. I walk in and eat three or four," Ersher said, adding with a laugh, "I haven't used a fork since 1998."



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