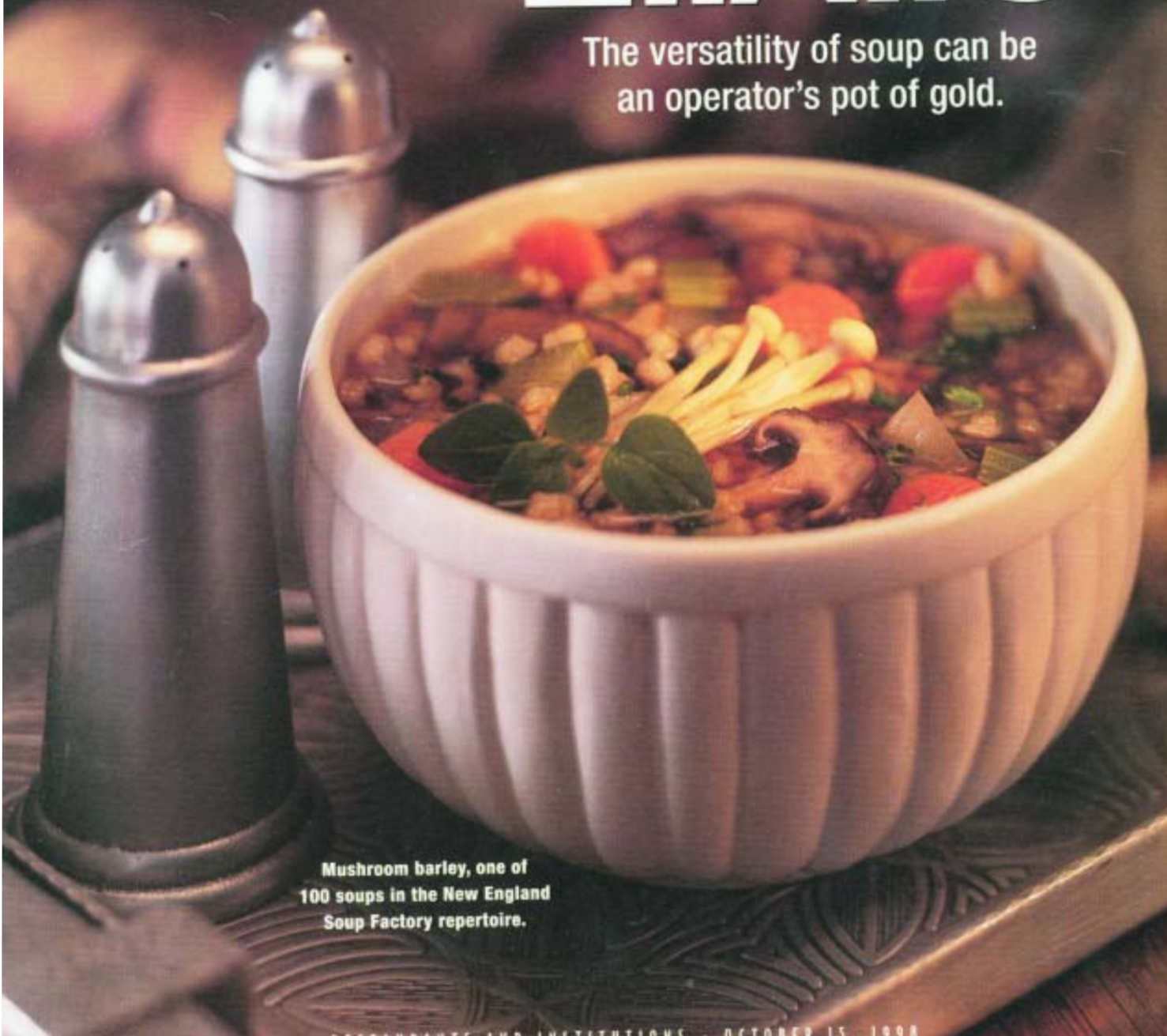


R&I FOOD

Aromatic Elixirs

By Laura Yee
R&I SENIOR EDITOR

The versatility of soup can be
an operator's pot of gold.



Mushroom barley, one of
100 soups in the New England
Soup Factory repertoire.



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hether it soothes, sustains or nourishes a weary soul, the power of soup is omnipresent. Just ask Marjorie Druker, who created the New England Soup Factory with her husband, Paul Brophy, both graduates of Johnson & Wales University, Providence, R.I.

Three years ago, when the couple opened their first eatery in the Boston suburb of Brookline, they were selling 10 to 15 gallons of soup a day. With time and a second store, in Newton, Mass., under their belts, they're simmering 150 gallons daily. And year-end projections are expected to push that figure even higher.

Their concept is a microcosm of the restaurant world, reflecting the most recent trends. Soup flavor combinations are more expansive than ever as Americans venture deeper into ethnic cuisines. People crave bigger, bolder flavors, and Druker and Brophy deliver. Their spicy Thai peanut soup is indicative of the interest in Asian flavors, while pureed carrot and ginger reflects the increasing popularity of velvety pureed soups.

"We are very serious about what we do," says Druker, 34. "We have four 40-gallon kettles, and we pump out soup all day. We love it."

That kind of passion and commitment has made Druker a pioneer in meal solutions, a segment for which soups are ideally suited. She was the original chef for Boston Chicken (now Boston Market), espousing well-seasoned, better-than-homemade food.

All soups at the Soup Factory are made from scratch. Druker and Brophy have created a library of about 100 varieties, which rotate through the concept's menu. Chicken vegetable, New England ▶ 36



In steak soup gratinee, traditional onion soup gets a beefy boost.

Chicken soup is a best seller, followed by vegetable soup and clam chowder, according to *R&I's* Menu Census.

◀ 29 corn and clam chowder and chili con carne are standards among the eight daily choices.

Other flavors are dictated by seasons. Fiddleheads and asparagus show up in spring, replaced by roasted peach and creamy fruity soups and chilled cucumber and Vidalia onion soup in summer. Come fall, tomato and butternut squash dominate the pot. And hearty tomato-based beef stew and wild mushroom barley relieve Boston's cold winters.

But the Soup Factory's interpretation of chicken soup (chicken vegetable, which may also be accompanied by noodles or a large matzo ball), remains the most popular. That reflects the findings of the most recent *Restaurants and Institutions Menu Census*, which charts chicken soup as a leading seller. Soup Factory varieties also include a version of tomato soup (with rice and basil), a favorite on noncommercial menus, as well as cream of broccoli and vegetable-type soups, top sellers at causal family-

style restaurants, according to the *R&I* census.

Druker maintains that the key to making soup lies in proper preparation and good ingredients. Sherry is stirred in at the end of cooking for bisques and pureed soups, while balsamic vinegar is added to a gazpacho of red and yellow peppers, extra-virgin olive oil, roasted garlic and tomato juice.

TAKING STOCK

The same integrity is maintained at Antero Grill in Salida, a central Colorado restaurant opened in May by the Woolley family.

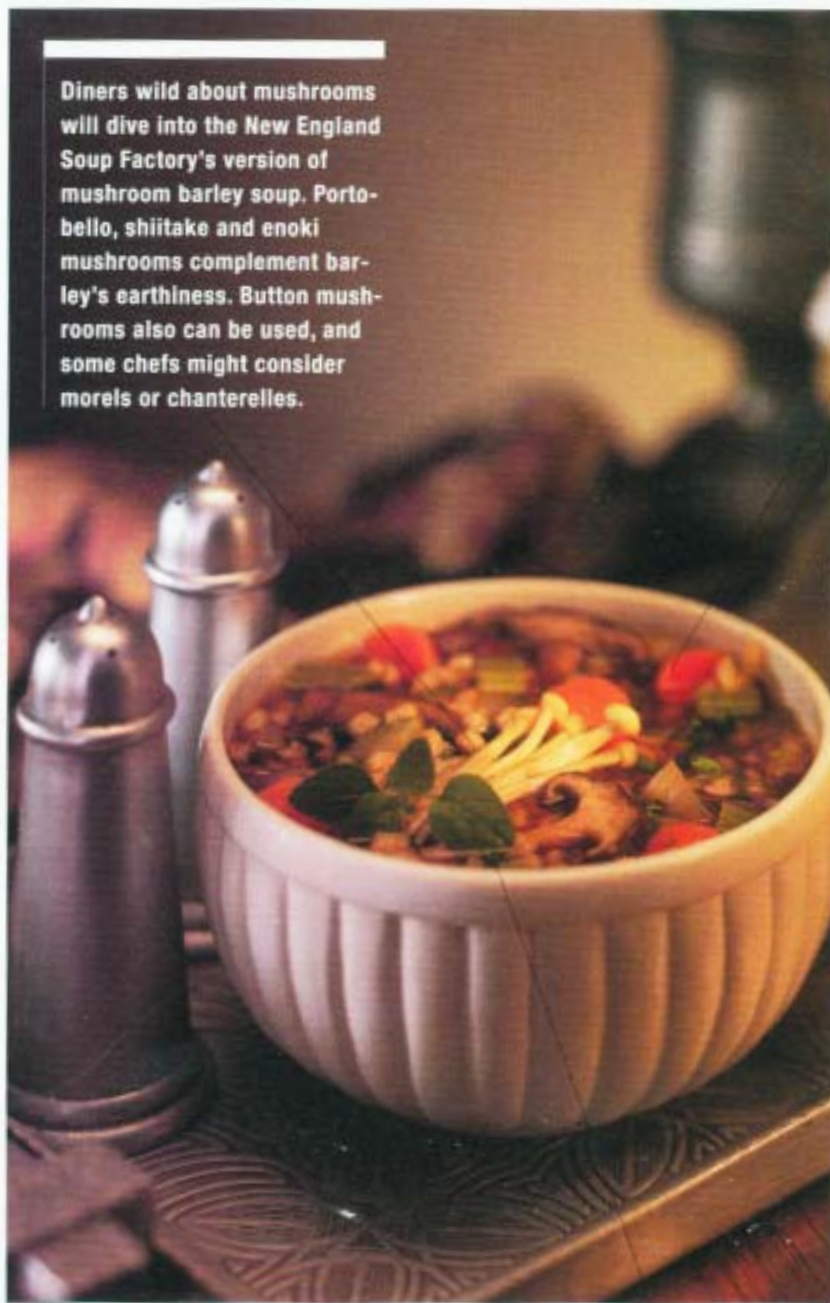
"To make good soup, you have to be patient—it requires time," says Executive Chef David Woolley, 27. "Soups can get rushed but then flavors won't have time to develop."

Woolley, who hails from several generations of chefs, emphasizes the importance of simmering stock at the proper temperature (barely ▶ 40

RI beyond the cover

Soup—chunky, smooth, creamy or light—has a magical quality. For customers, it is comforting and fortifying. For operators, flavors that can be tagged “soup of the day” seem infinite. Soup can be meat-, seafood- or vegetable-based, and its character can change just by borrowing spices from a different cuisine. Soup also can reflect the season’s best or become a clever vehicle for using quality leftovers.

Diners wild about mushrooms will dive into the New England Soup Factory’s version of mushroom barley soup. Portobello, shiitake and enoki mushrooms complement barley’s earthiness. Button mushrooms also can be used, and some chefs might consider morels or chanterelles.



Onions, celery and carrots mean more than good looks in a soup. These aromatic ingredients add flavor and texture but they also stretch the meal. For variety, slice the vegetables in different shapes and sizes.

Some of the best soups start with carefully house-made seafood, vegetable or meat stock—but there are other routes. To jump-start the cooking process, try prepared bases and flavorings which can be enhanced with fresh herbs and seasonings.