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NATIONAL SOUP MONTH

Q&A: Isaac's general manager has a passion for creating soup



MARY ELLEN WRIGHT | Staff Writer Jan 17, 2018



Heather Walmer is responsible for developing new soups for Isaac's Monday, January 15, 2018.

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Heather Walmer did not do much cooking until she entered a culinary arts program to study restaurant management about 17 years ago.

Now the general manager at Isaac's in Lititz, Walmer helps develop soups for the 19 locations of the regional chain of restaurants. While Isaac's is best known for its sandwiches, named after birds, it also serves up a lot of soup from an ever-changing menu.

In observance of January's National Soup Month, we asked Walmer about some of the soups she has created, and about the process for getting soup on the menu at Isaac's. We also asked about the Isaac's Get Soup! Give Soup! promotion, in which the company donates soup to area programs that serve the hungry.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What is your culinary background?

I went to culinary arts school, but I based my program in restaurant management rather than the culinary end. But I still like playing (in the kitchen). I went to YTI (then called York Technical Institute, now the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts). It was one degree — culinary arts and restaurant management. I chose to go down the restaurant management end rather than cooking. But we learned to cook as part of the degree.

Tell us about some of the soups you have developed.

My top soup — I'm so proud of this one — is the Brussels sprout bisque. I came up with the recipe about a year ago, and we served it as a featured soup. We had Brussels sprouts left over from another featured soup — I think it was a harvest vegetable soup — and we still had 12 bags of Brussels sprouts. I knew I had to come up with another soup that had them in it. I came across a recipe online, and thought, "This sounds really good." But I wanted to keep it to the ingredients we use here at Isaac's — the local, fresh ingredients that we get in. So I tweaked it ... and got it rolling.

What's in it?

It's a thick cream soup. It has Brussels sprouts, feta cheese, parsley, onions, celery and some spices. The first time around, I used Parmesan cheese, and I wasn't happy with it. So I used feta. It had more of a creaminess to it. Feta doesn't always melt down, so you get a few little pieces of feta, which would pop (in flavor).

Any other soups you're particularly proud of creating?

I just got done with a creamy Tuscan chicken. And that was a creamy chicken soup. It had lentils, onions, celery, tomatoes and chicken, and it had a balsamic vinaigrette at the end to give it a (flavor) pop. There was a creamy chicken with spinach and feta — that also had the onions, celery and carrots in it. I play pretty often with soups.

What is the process for getting a soup on the companywide menu at Isaac's?

I'll create something and then I'll take it to our menu committee. And we meet about once a month. They sample it, give me honest feedback, and then I come back and tweak it if I need to, and then we roll it out.

Who's on the committee?

There's about 12 to 15 (members). We consist of the CEO, Mike Weaver; two senior managers; and the rest consists of general managers and assistant general managers. The general managers on the committee are allowed to work on soup creation. It takes about 60 to 90 days (to get a new soup on the menu). This process is relatively new.

How many years have you been working at Isaac's?

This year will be 16. Isaac's was my (culinary school) internship. I started at the East York location for just two or three short months, and then I transferred here because I was living here. I started as a deli manager and worked my way up.

How did you wind up developing soups?

It's just a passion. It's that creativeness that still lingers from my culinary background.

Do you sometimes serve soups at the Lititz Isaac's that aren't on the menu for all the locations?

Yes. We call it the Chef's Choice. It allows all the stores to use products that they may have in their freezer.

Tell me about the current Isaac's soup promotion.

It's called Get Soup! Give Soup! For every 100 cups of soup — in-house or take-out — that we sell in January, February and March, we're donating a gallon of soup to a local soup kitchen or shelter. We here in Lititz donate our soup to Lunch with Luke, at St. Luke's (United Church of Christ). Every Wednesday they have an open kitchen (free fellowship meal), from 12 to 1, so we donate (several) gallons of soup to them each week. We donate our pepperjack tomato soup, which is our most popular and seems to be a huge hit.

How is the promotion going so far this year?

Last week, here in Lititz, we were able to donate 10 gallons of soup. We're able to donate 9 more gallons this week. Companywide, since Jan. 1, we've been able to donate 224 gallons of soup. And each gallon is able to feed 100 people. During the promotion, we have one featured soup for the whole week, every week, in addition to the pepperjack tomato, which is (on the menu) every day.

Besides the pepperjack tomato, what are some of the most popular soups at Isaac's?

Cheddar broccoli, chicken and rice, mushroom and wild rice, New England clam chowder. We stick to local ingredients, and make all our soups, every day, from scratch, which is something I take a lot of pride in.

What was your favorite soup when you were growing up, and who made it for you?

My mom and grandma made soup for me, if it didn't come from a can. My favorite was probably just good old-fashioned chicken noodle, with rivels (little dumpling-like pieces). I just made a batch (here) last week, just to try it out. It sold pretty quickly. One of my deli workers made the rivels to put into the soup.

Why is soup still so popular?

Right now, because it's so cold, it just sticks to the ribs. If you're feeling chilly, the best way to warm up is a cup of soup. It's a great starter for a meal, and it can be a meal, too.

ISAAC'S SOUP RECIPE

Isaac's restaurants rarely reveal their soup recipes but have made an exception for the company's Get Soup! Give Soup! program.

This soup, which the regional chain of eateries has been serving for many years, is based on an old French soup recipe.

HUNTER'S CHICKEN SOUP

Makes 1 gallon.

Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 3 cups onions, sliced
- 1 1/2 cups green peppers, diced
- 1 tablespoon garlic, chopped
- 2 quarts chicken stock
- 1/2 tablespoon basil
- 1/2 tablespoon tarragon
- 2 (14.5-ounce) cans tomato fillets
- 1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste
- 1 pound mushrooms, sliced
- 1 pound chicken meat
- 1/2 cup white wine

Directions:

Heat oil in a pot. Add the onions, peppers and garlic, and saute until soft and onions are

translucent.

Add chicken stock, basil, tarragon, tomato fillets and paste, mushrooms and chicken, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes.

Add wine to soup and stir.

— Courtesy of Isaac's restaurants

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