



diningout

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SOUP'S ON

Piping hot, these bowls take the bite out of winter's chill



Belly Shack's hot and sour soup is brimming with mineral-laced chunks of hoisin, slices of chicken and a perfect dash of cummin.

The phrase "salad days" has often been used to describe one's carefree youth or the moment at which a person lived at the zenith of his powers. The expression was coined by Shakespeare in the play *Antony and Cleopatra*, wherein Cleopatra reminiscing about dalliance with Julius Caesar speaks of her "... salad days. When I was green in judgment..." As one who rebuffs salad as if it were swine flu, I can only deduce that by making such an association, Shakespeare was alluding to food—or, at best, was a Birkenstock-wearing, hippie, super-vegan.

Having just slurped up a bowl of sweet, beefy Pho Die broth from Pho 888 (1127 W. Argyle; 773-607-8829) a few hours ago, during Chicago's first discernible snowfall, what I know is that if Shakespeare's palate was as finely tuned as his wit, he really would have revised the expression as "soup days."

Pho is soul-soothing, sweet and savory, crunchy and silky, spicy and comforting. It is interactive, served with a plate rife with anise-flavored stalks of Asian basil, a mound of crisp bean sprouts (the crunch), lime, jalapeños, plummy hoisin and a dollop of sweet-burning sriracha allowing you to customize to your tongue's pleasure—or your stomach's capacity for searing chili.

It is possible that harring the keyy claws of Chicago's icy winter at the door with such a bowl has made me a romantic, and you think my argument is hasty. But a week earlier, while I was relaxing on the Mexican beaches of Playa del Carmen, I came upon a bowl of green chili posse bursting with satisfyingly chewy nuggets of hony. The day after that, I had a charred, roasted bean soup at a different taqueria. The chili in these soups invoked a sweat, that ultimately like a natural air conditioner, mitigated the sweeter of the damp Mexican air. Soup works hot and cold, day or night and in sickness or in health.

And so in that spirit, I have compiled a list of Chicago's best bowls for your life-enriching pleasure. It should be noted that I also have discovered that January is National Soup Month. Of course, such a holiday is so official as Hallmark-inspired Sweetest Day or a Sourdough Festival, so that didn't hold much sway toward bringing you this service. If you are seeking the chill-inspired



The piping-hot French onion soup at La Sardinie bubbles over its toasted Gruyere "crust." | JORDAN KIM/SUN-TIMES



The king crab-filled carrot soup at Macku Sushi is fired up with Chinese seven-spice topped with whipped cream and a cocunut-infused rice. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN/SUN-TIMES



La Sardinie serves up a striking Pernod-scented bouillabaisse featuring plump crustaceans. | JORDAN KIM/SUN-TIMES

schwitz I outlined above, I can think of no better starter than Frontiers Grill's (445 N. Clark; 312-401-1434) Topolobampo Tortilla Soup, a fish chicken broth spiced with chocolate pasilla chili and thickened with fresh corn-purified tortillas and topped with a dollop of "hand-made Jack cheese" (rested, not dyed nuclear orange, pre-shredded and packaged in a resealable plastic bag). Speaking of chili, there are plenty of good ones in town. The bowl of red at Chuck's Southern Comfort's Cafe in Burbank (5501 W. 76th; 708-229-8700), also featuring a blend of red chili, is thick like a complex Mexican mole sauce.

My favorite local chili, however, is the Greek-style (or Cincinnati-style as it's known in Ohio), alpine-infused brew served at Bridgeport's Ramona Grill (2810 S. Halsted; 773-847-9058). It doesn't hurt that the Ramona is also the ideal of a diner.

The Greeks have nothing on the French, though, when it comes to serving up liquid comfort. Exhibit A and B: the French onion soup and bouillabaisse at West Loop bistro La Sardinie (111 N. Carpenter; 312-433-2800). The former is a piping-hot crock bubbling over with toasted Gruyere and also featuring a blend of red chili, is thick like a couple of baguette rafta, and the latter is a Pernod-scented and plump crustacean-larded stew that conjures a sunny afternoon in Marseille before the Mediterranean waves.

To make truly stellar soup, it doesn't hurt to mold cultures, and having the Dish was a matter of cabaret (President Taft allegedly hired a chef specifically to make the soup while he was in the White House). Either Edwin Brunschweiler Sr., the second owner of the hotel (after the Drake brothers), got the recipe directly from the owner of Bookbinders in the 1890s, or the Drake's original architect Benjamin Marshall, finding the Bookbinders owner uncooperative, took their chef out for a few drinks and wrangled it from him.

Somewhere along the way the tomato- and-roast-based soup infused with sherry evolved from using "snapper turtle" meat (as it's still served at Bookbinders) to red snapper fish. I haven't been able to flat exactly when the change was made, though the recipe definitely called for fish at the Drake as early as 1952.

The Drake version is served with a crystal decanter of sherry, which you pour into the bowl as you eat. The nuttiness of the sherry rolls up your nostrils along with the vegetal perfume of tomato and celery. It's so refined and tasty, I guarantee even an araguarda-worshipping William Shakespeare would praise it.

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silky tuna gets pop in your mouth like a beehived water balloon—that I really relish.

Though it's also hard to resist Macku Sushi's (2229 N. Clybourn; 773-850-8022) demitasse of king crab-filled carrot soup fired up with Chinese seven-spice (fenugreek, cloves, cinnamon, star anise) and Sichuan peppercorns are the base of this mix), topped with whipped cream and a rice crisp redden with coconut perfume.

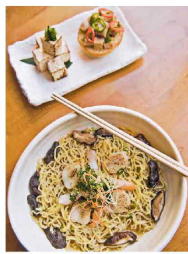
Should you require a little history with your soup, there may be no better bowl than the Bookbinder soup (named after the restaurant of its provenance, Bookbinders of Philadelphia) served at the Coo P' Or and the Cape Cod Room (140 E. Walton; 312-787-2200) at the Drake Hotel. There are two stories detailing how the recipe came to the Drake, both based on the idea that Bookbinders and the Drake catered to entertainers, royalty and political dignitaries, and having the Dish was a matter of cabaret (President Taft allegedly hired a chef specifically to make the soup while he was in the White House). Either Edwin Brunschweiler Sr., the second owner of the hotel (after the Drake brothers), got the recipe directly from the owner of Bookbinders in the 1890s, or the Drake's original architect Benjamin Marshall, finding the Bookbinders owner uncooperative, took their chef out for a few drinks and wrangled it from him.

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The pho die, hot soup at Pho 888 is sweet, savory, spicy and crunchy—depending on how you customize it. | JESHA JACKSON/SUN-TIMES



A bowl of soy-kissed ramen with prawns, scallops, fresh tofu and a pork belly bun is a veritable feast at Roka Moku. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN/SUN-TIMES