

INGREDIENTS

SOUP OPERA

Thanks to the recession and an ever-growing interest in healthy eating, soups are taking British menus by storm, with chefs finding interesting new ways of creating crowd-pleasing variants on the dish all year round. *Rosie Birkett reports*

In Asia, soup is a very big deal. Whether it's pho in Vietnam, miso in Japan, tom yum in Thailand, laksa in Malaysia or won ton soup in China, it forms a staple part of the diet for many Asian societies.

Daniel Galmiche, head chef of the Vineyard at Stockcross, knows this only too well, having perfected his soup-making when working at L'Aigle d'Or in Singapore, where he was expected to create two different soups for the menu each day.

"There was no room for error," he says. "The soups had to be perfect because there was such a demand for them."

French-born Galmiche also credits his mother's consistent soup-cooking as an influence on him, and cites France's brasseries as thriving soup hubs.

"Brasseries usually have a soup of the day or speciality of the region, like soup de poisson in the South of France, or soups in Brittany made with different bouillons," he explains.

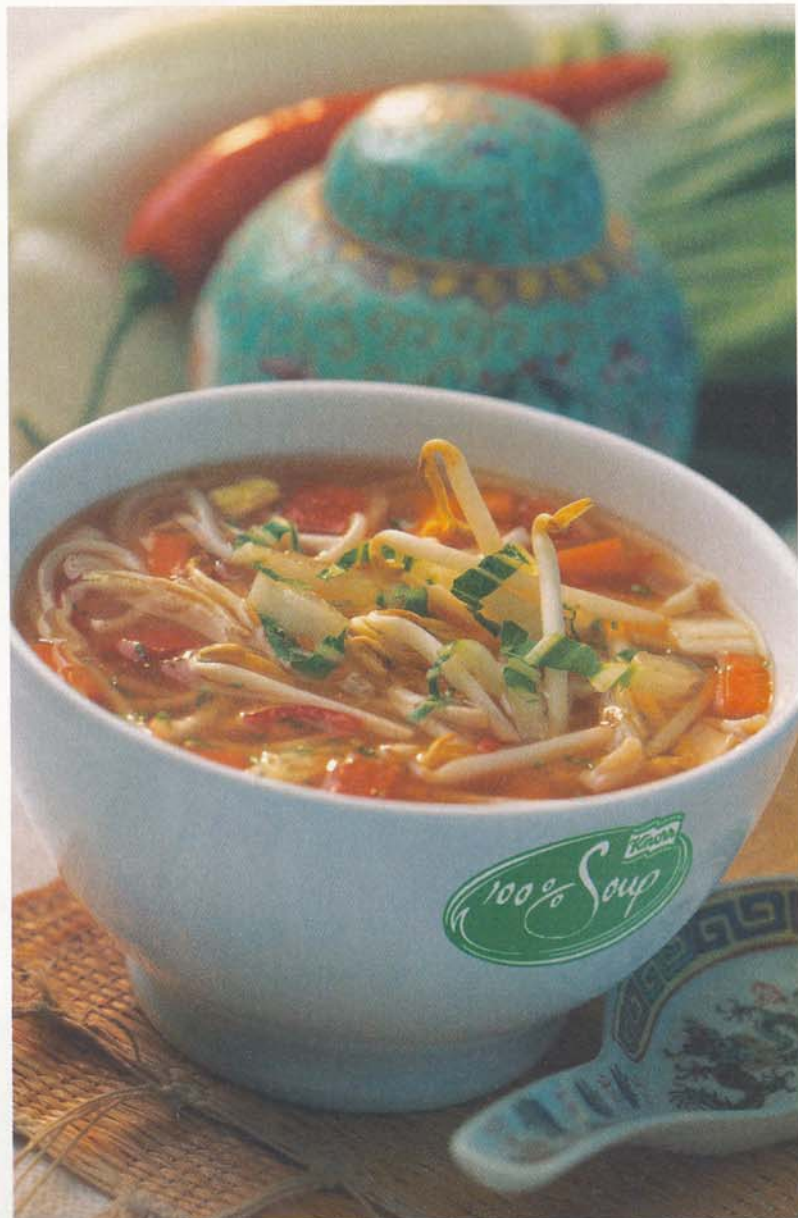
But on this side of the Channel, soup has traditionally been considered more of a winter warmer, or comfort food; its puréed vegetable bases seeming somewhat prosaic in contrast to the fragrantly infused broths of its eastern cousins. And while we may occasionally see the odd gazpacho rear its chilly head come summer, a year-round soup offering has been limited in the UK.

A QUESTION OF ECONOMY

Not so anymore. The recession and subsequent drive towards economy, as well as increased travel and influences from international cuisines, has brought a wave of more interesting soups to the table. According to market analyst Horizons' Menurama survey: "More and more establishments are putting soup on their menus – presumably because it's cheap to produce and the margin on it can be fairly high. We know from research that customers are also looking for value for money through the recession, so to choose soup from the menu would suit their needs too."

But while pricing is a key factor, there's no doubt that flavours are becoming more exciting. Healthy casual dining chain Leon has two fresh soups available every day – a vegetarian option (such as lentil Masala) and a meaty option (like bacon and chilli bean), while at Moro in London's Clerkenwell, spicy chorizo and chestnut soup is on offer for £7.50 a bowl.

Horizons' Menurama survey also revealed a



Light-textured Asian broths and soups, such as Thai vegetable, are a good menu alternative to salads

YEAR-ROUND MENU SUGGESTIONS

At fresh soup manufacturer Redemption Food Company, managing director and former chef Mark Crow recommends that spring soups should keep fullness of flavour while being a little lighter than winter soups – try chicken chowder or chickpea and spinach.

Summer soups require interesting flavours, and should be light in texture and consistency, to provide an exciting alternative to sandwiches and salads – think yellow pepper and Stilton or chilled avocado.

Autumn flavours should be warm and tangy, such as carrot, apple and celery or French onion, while winter calls for hearty and filling varieties to keep out the cold, such as roasted parsnip and artichoke or chestnut and wild mushroom.

→ www.redemptionfood.co.uk

When it comes to types of soup that work all year round, Emily Frank, brand manager for Heinz Foodservice, whose range includes Heinz Classic Soups, Condensed Soups and Select soup pouches, says caterers shouldn't necessarily be looking to global flavours and incomprehensible twists on favourites.

"UK consumers are passionate about their own traditional soups, such as classic tomato, and caterers should consider the fact that one of the key trends in the food market in 2009 was a return to 'feelgood comfort foods'," she says.

"Consumers are turning back to old favourites, which offer reassurance. Although money is tight

and customers are not eating out as often, when they do, they are choosing soups they know they will enjoy rather than those that are a bit too experimental."

→ www.heinzsight.co.uk

For year-round appeal Nick Parnell, business development chef at Unilever Foodsolutions, supplier of the Knorr range of 100% Soups, suggests consommés, velouté and Asian-style broths.

"Bouillons, when clarified and mixed with different flavours, such as truffles and morels, make a delicious consommé," he says.

"Flavours such as Thai vegetable work well on a spring or summer menu or, for a taste of Spain, lentil and bacon soup could be incorporated into a trio of tapas served alongside diced sautéed chorizo and a shaved fennel and herb salad as a more substantial starter with a variety of flavours."

→ www.unileverfoodsolutions.co.uk

At Nestlé Professional, supplier of the Maggi range of dehydrated soups, marketing director Martin Lines says the key to maintaining demand all year round is seasonality.

"During winter, customers generally look for a substantial soup, with noodles and root vegetables such as parsnips and potatoes," he says.

"In warmer months, a lighter soup is favoured, and can be achieved by using vegetables such as asparagus, celery or cucumber. Alternatively,

a refreshing, chilled soup is perfect in the height of summer. Rather than just relying on gazpacho, try a creamy asparagus or onion, pea and mint alternative."

→ www.maggi-menusolutions.co.uk

For Ian Toal, managing director of Delice de France UK, soup is the ideal way to showcase seasonal produce and the company has a range of 10 varieties for menus all year round.

"Help consumers beat their winter blues by putting a heart-warming leek and potato soup on your menu," he says.

"This timeless combination of potatoes and leeks simmered in a blend of vegetable stock, cream and butter is the perfect winter warmer."

"As spring draws nearer opt for a lighter soup that is still packed with flavour such as carrot and coriander, a blend of sweet carrots and cream, finished with a sprinkling of coriander."

"British summertime means it's time for a classic cream of tomato soup. The smooth blend of rich red tomatoes and cream makes this a favourite feel-good soup. Peas are ready for picking in August so let your menu reflect that by adding a pea and ham soup, a tasty blend of split, garden and marrowfat peas, combined with tender strips of ham."

"Onions are at their best in autumn and there are few things more comforting than traditional French onion soup, served with a crunchy baked bread crouton topped with melted cheese."

→ www.delicedefrance.co.uk

colourful selection of soups such as wild mushroom and Masala at restaurant chain Ask and white onion and pesto at Marriott hotels, with gastropubs using British produce such as haddock, celeriac, butternut squash, cheese, chicken and lamb.

For Galmiche, who has soups like pumpkin or celery velouté on his menu, originality and seasonality are crucial.

"We like to present the soup so that it stands out as a bit different," he explains.

"We always do a garnish with the soup, and we make it quite fancy, serving the rest of the soup in a jug. For example, with our pumpkin soup there is a small fondant of pumpkin and a small tortellini of goat's cheese and spinach, plus a Sainte Maure goat's cheese espuma on top and a small pumpkin crisp for texture."

"I always try and use seasonal ingredients that blend well together. You can do a soup all year round as long as you're cooking with the seasons – and the beauty of it is that each month will throw up a new ingredient to base your soup around."

At Paul Kitching's Edinburgh restaurant 21212, soups are an important part of the menu.

"It is a very underrated thing but I think there's a resurgence in soup at the moment," he says. "If you gave me a bowl of tomato soup I wouldn't thank you for it – but throw in some crushed pistachios, some sultanas and a dollop of sour cream and it can be lovely. I want shapes and flavours and lumps and dumplings and vegetables, and some intrigue lurking underneath the liquid."

In a fine dining context, Kitching admits that soups need to step up to the mark. His ►

www.caterersearch.com

"I want shapes and flavours and lumps and dumplings and vegetables, and some intrigue lurking underneath the liquid"
Paul Kitching



Flavour-packed stalwart carrot and coriander is ideal for a spring or summer menu