

So Many Soups... So Many Cold Months Ahead

By Bryce Parks

Man, when you set out to write about the best soups in town, you just don't know the can of... soup... you've opened. The bottom line is, pretty much everyone serves soup. A lot of them are pre-packaged, probably from a big sealed bag. In fact, a secret insider who works with a lot of restaurants confirmed that probably 75% are serving pre-made soups. And you know what? A lot of those soups are still pretty darn good. So who's to say?

But naturally, we'd like to focus on scratch-made, locally prepared soups, especially from non-chain locations if possible. So when we stray to ones that are not, I apologize. As we were figuring out just what to cover, we realized that there were just so many options, we were going to have to narrow down the feature a bit. So with the sidebar "favorites" along with this story, we decided that we were going to look at local soups that are so damn good, so popular, that they never leave the menu. Soups that drive us to the restaurant just because we want the soup as much as anything else. So after you read about them in this issue, you can still go get them in real life and not show up to find out that amazing soup is not the special today, and instead, they have a nice cream of broccoli with sauerkraut or something.

But what about the soups that rotate often, if not daily? Are they not just as good if not occasionally better than the permanent soup menu items? Sure they are. And while we don't have the space to run down every soup everyone in town serves, we figured we could give you the scoop—or should we say cup or bowl—on some of the places in town known for their great soups even if they don't have the same flavors featured consistently. And also, in most cases, we're going to try to weed out the pre-made soups that come from distributors. A little props for the extra work and dedication to craft for whipping up fresh batches of the heavenly brew on a regular basis. While we've not been to them all, feedback from smart and attractive people like you on Facebook gave us a lot of tasty insights.

A lot of cafe-style specialty breakfast/lunch spots feature at least one if not multiple soups on the menu. Of those, some that we've tried and love for their homemade soups include Birdie's Bistro

in downtown Dubuque who, in addition to simple but stellar breakfasts and lunch sandwiches and entrees, whips up fresh homemade soup daily.

Knockout Melts on the other side of town at the bustling corner of JFK and Pennsylvania Ave. also makes a soup of the day from scratch six days a week. Some recent features have included classics like chicken noodle, broccoli cheese, vegetable beef, and creamy chicken and wild rice to more adventurous fare like pork carnitas, chicken tortilla, lasagna, and cheesy chicken bacon ranch.

A little otter told us that Chef Rudi at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium not only makes the best soups, but he also often packages them up and sells them out of a cold case at the museum's grill. And hey, no admission is needed to access the grill!

The relatively new Roses & Berries Cafe near Asbury mixes Mediterranean entrees with French pastries on their menu. Along with that, you can always find lentil soup (one of my Facebook friend's favorites), chicken and mushroom soup, and a rotating chef's soup of the week. The menu is huge, and picking one meal is so hard to choose, but hey, there's always room for soup.

Across the bridge, one of our most-est favoritest dive bars is The Other Side on the Sinsinawa Ave. strip in East Dubuque. They are known for their great lunch specials for a great price. Starting this month, they will feature three or more scratch-made soups for lunch every Monday. There is always a great variety in the soups, and The OS always simmers them a day early to get maximum flavor. Visit [facebook.com/TheOtherSideBar](https://www.facebook.com/TheOtherSideBar) on Monday morning to see what the soups will be each week. Oh, and they come with fresh-baked bread. Yeah, right?! Oh, and if it happens to be some left-over at the end of service, they will sell it in handy to-go quarts at crazy great prices. But it's first come, first served.

Also in East Dubuque, Millennium Marina has a scratch-made soup each week. We know it's made from scratch because everything at Millennium is made from scratch. And the view ain't half bad either.

We lunch downtown a lot, so apologies if we're being a little too downtown-centric



PAST REGULAR & ROTATING SOUPS WE'VE ENJOYED FROM BIRDIE'S BISTRO, ROSES & BERRIES CAFE, THE OTHER SIDE, FRITZ & FRITES, L.MAY EATERY, AND BRAZEN OPEN KITCHEN

with our soup tour, but the west end, for all its variety, leans pretty heavily on national chains. So yes, Olive Garden and Panara both have some great soups, but I think most people already know about them, so we're not going to spend time there. We also like the French onion and loaded baked potato soups at Houlihan's on Schmitt Island by Q Casino + Resort, and I think Danny chose one of those as his favorites. I can confirm—they are both tasty!

But downtown, homemade rotating soups of the day reign. Convivium Urban Farmstead will wow the organic food lover in you with their daily soup. We've also had the changing soups at 1st & Main and Stone Cliff Winery and keep getting it again.

Catfish Charlie's, 7 Hills Brewing Co., Caroline's Restaurant at Hotel Julien Dubuque, and The Vault Restaurant all feature both permanent soup features and rotating daily specials. I'm sure others do, too. I do enjoy Catfish Charlie's not-quite-traditional chowder. I might even make it one of my go-tos. I had the brisket chili this week from 7 Hills, and it was very good, but to me, chili is chili, and it's hard to mess it up... though people always manage to do so in competitions by trying to get too creative. Chili is great—let it be chili!

Dawn Livingston loves the tom kha, one of five soups on the menu at Pete's Thai Kitchen, but it's a unique flavor for a unique palette. Tom kha is a spicy and sour hot soup with coconut milk. And she'd know good flavors as she spends her days at the Galena Canning Company. She says to add a side of jasmine rice and shrimp, and you're "swingin' on star" as my friend Gary Olsen would say.

Over in Galena, the Galena Taphouse has a killer chicken soup made with a ginger broth that is "simple yet adored," while Cannova's Pizzeria's homemade soups change weekly and are amazing. The Market House Restaurant H.P. also reportedly has wonderful soups. And you know only delicious things come out of Otto's by Kevin Scharpf where their weekly housemade soup is true to form. These are all in addition to two from Embe Eatery that made our all-time favorites list. Our late dining columnist Rich Belmont was a big fan of Fritz & Frites, a part German-part French restaurant located near the end of North Main Street. He notes, "Onion Soup Gratinée is always on the menu. Caramelized onions are simmered for over eight hours in beef stock, special spices, and red wine. Then a three cheese blend of Gruyère, Parmesan, and Swiss cheese is added just before serving."

When it comes to evening dining, it's been our experience that if you see "soup of the day" offered at Pepper Sprout, L. May Eatery, or Copper Kettle, you're going

to be happy with your choice. Brazen Open Kitchen is currently offering sweet potato soup though it changes with the seasonal menu. The highly-touted New England clam chowder from Mario's Italian Restaurant (because that's where you go for great chowdah, right!) is apparently only available on Friday, so plan accordingly.

And man, we didn't even touch on the omnipresent salad bar soups that you will find at every reputable supper club in the Tri-States. I've certainly had some stellar cups of beef barley to accompany my tiny salad, pile of pasta salad, big helping of cheese spread, and 20 packages of breadstick crackers.

And I didn't even get into the homemade soups available daily at most of Dubuque's grocery stores, but there's only so much time in a day. So sorry, but we're focusing on the small-batch love coming out of our favorite sit-down joints. And I should mention the soup "bar" at Kwik Star (or Kwik Trip depending on where you're reading) that, especially in the winter, will have a half-dozen soups, hot and ready to serve all day long. How convenient!

But I do want to point out the frozen quarts of soups you can get at Cremer's Meats on Rhomberg Ave. Some are housemade, but the ones that come in fresh frozen are essentially made from scratch very recently and regionally, and they're restocked regularly in the freezer case. As Jeff Cremer points out, soups are not complex but can take a long time to make it right. So if someone can do the hard work and make it easily available to you to take home and warm up, then that's a win right there. And I don't mean warm up from a can.

If you read this story and wondered where Oolong Asian Cuisine is or Caroline's white bean chicken chili, Woodfire Grill's lobster bisque, Embe's seafood chowder, or the simple but wonderful sizzling rice soup at House of China, well, that's because you have not yet read the side features to this story. We picked out a handful of soups that Danny, Kristina, or I love so much, we thought they deserved special attention. So make sure you read those little love letters and make your cold-weather travel plans to start your soup journey with 365ink.

If we left you or your favorite place out, we apologize. It's a BIG topic, and we only wanted to speak on behalf of the ones we've personally tried. And if you are one who goes out and always just skims over the soup and salad offerings on the menu to get to the entrees, well... NO SOUP FOR YOU!

And hey, seriously, if we really missed the bowl on a soup we MUST try, let us know. Send an email to info@dubuque365.com! ■



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SIZZLING RICE SOUP AT HOUSE OF CHINA



LOBSTER BISQUE AT WOODFIRE GRILL



WHITE BEAN CHICKEN CHILI AT CAROLINE'S RESTAURANT



CHICKEN AND CABBAGE SOUP AT EUROPA HAUS RESTAURANT AND BIER STUBE

Our Favorite Soups

SIZZLING RICE SOUP HOUSE OF CHINA BY BRYCE PARKS

You know what's so uniquely special about the sizzling rice soup from House of China? Neither do I. So why do I love it so much? I think it's probably the crispy, nutty, oily chunks of white rice fried to a golden brown edge. I mean, the rest is just a simple salty broth, chicken-based I think. Then, right before they serve it, they add in little shrimp, raw celery, carrots, and green onion. When they bring it to the table, they drop in some still-super-hot flat pieces of fried/toasted rice that literally sizzle when they hit the broth. They then break up the tablets of crunchy rice love into smaller pieces inside the serving bowl before they ladle it into smaller cups for each person. And naturally, we all hope the server gives us the biggest pieces of rice. It's just so light and simple and lovely, and I could eat just bowls of this soup and be happy, but luckily the world has also

invented crab rangoons, and for my money, the ones at House of China are my favorite. Sooo creamy.

LOBSTER BISQUE WOODFIRE GRILL AT DIAMOND JO CASINO BY BRYCE PARKS

I love lobster. I mean, I luuuuuuuuuves me some lobster. Connecticut lobster rolls are my love language, and right behind it is lobster bisque. And the best lobster bisque in the land by my measure is from Woodfire Grill at Diamond Jo Casino. It's so rich and deeply flavorful. It's good the bowl isn't any bigger because it's so densely packed that you want just the right amount before you've overdosed. And it's, like, \$8 a bowl. You could sit at the bar and have it with some of that awesome fresh hot bread they make, and it's not even an expensive dinner. Then again, I have, on occasion, been known to ask them to put a whole fresh mini lobster tail right into my soup. So now it's like a \$30 bowl of soup, but hey, leave me alone, it's my money and my dream and I'll do what I want. This is bliss. Call it the Bryce from *365ink* maneuver when you ask for the same. Damn, now I want some.

WHITE BEAN CHICKEN CHILI CAROLINE'S RESTAURANT AT HOTEL JULIEN DUBUQUE BY BRYCE PARKS

I think that, more than any other favorite local soup in the area, when I asked Facebook what their No. 1 choice was, the white bean chicken chili from Caroline's Restaurant at Hotel Julien Dubuque got the most mentions. And it's for a good reason. It's the kind of soup you could just have a couple of bowls of and call it a meal. It's so good. Thick and creamy, this light-orangish colored chowder-like "chili" doesn't look much like chili, but I guess the presence of the white beans makes it so. And even "orange" isn't the right color. Maybe saffron or turmeric colored? Call it what you like, it's just the perfect level of hearty, flavorful satiation that you're looking for, especially when it's cold outside. It's their go-to entry for every area contest and major event, and that's because they know it always works. If it ain't broke, keep brewing it up.

CHICKEN AND CABBAGE SOUP EUROPA HAUS RESTAURANT AND BIER STUBE BY DANNY FAIRCHILD

Ah, the Bier Stube. If you haven't experienced it, you're not Dubuquing right. Sure, you'll find some good German beers behind the bar, and that's exciting enough, but I go there for what happens in the kitchen. It's all good, and all the entrees are served with this wonderful chicken and cabbage soup for starters. It's hearty and deliciously savory. It's the soup I want served to me whenever I'm sick, like... German penicillin. It's everything I want in a chicken soup with decent-sized chunks of chicken and big, wide noodles. Then you got your aromatics in there with celery and onion. And then the cabbage. It gives some good body to the soup and Germanizes things up a bit. I'm only slightly German, but this soup feels like a recipe that's been in my family for years. It's not, but it should be. I think I'd have to be adopted by the Weiblinger family (owners) for that to happen. My real parents are dead, so I'm in if they are. It's such a great way to start a meal because it's satisfying but not filling. And it bridges the way to the more Bavarian flavors you'll experience at

Europa Haus, like sauerbraten, or red cabbage, or spaetzle. Pro tip: Eat out all the noodles from your soup and then add some of your spaetzle to the soup when it comes. Yum, yum, yum. Or forget all about that and just add crackers. I swear, I have found no soup anywhere, including the Tri-States' best supper clubs, that takes a cracker better than this soup. It's like this soup was made specifically to have some saltines crumbled up into it. And yet it stands perfectly well on its own. Because that's chicken soup for ya. And don't sleep on the homemade caramel apple nut pie for dessert.

FRENCH ONION SOUP BY DANNY FAIRCHILD

If there's a soup that you'll perennially see on restaurant menus, it's French onion soup. The soup du jour will come and go as it pleases, but French onion soup is always there for you. And I love that. I love it when a restaurant has French onion soup as a permanent fixture on their menu. And, because of the French influence and so many different recipes, you can use many of the same words to describe this soup as you would use to describe wine. Words like sweet or dry. Depth of flavor. Dark. Light. Acidic. Things like that. And to support that fact, French onion soup pairs well with both red and white wines. Whether it's a pinot or a chard, it'll go well with it. And if you're like me and you absolutely LOVE a French dip sandwich, a restaurant's French onion soup is a good indicator of how good the French dip will be. Here are some of my favorite French onion soups in the area:

HOULIHAN'S

For some people, me included, French onion soup isn't French onion soup unless there's just an obscene amount of cheese baked over the top. And not just over the top. I like it to be friggin' draped over the top and onto the sides of the bowl where it can get nice and cooked. As much as I love French onion soup, my heart goes out to the dishwashing staff. It's not easy to get baked-on cheese off your soup crock. I do my part by chiseling off every little bit of that delicious stray cheese before I even tuck it into the soup itself. It's a satisfying process and gives you something to do while your entree arrives. Houlihan's French onion soup is the perfect

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FRENCH ONION SOUP AT HOULIHAN'S



FRENCH ONION SOUP AT THE VAULT



PHO & RAMEN AT OOLONG ASIAN CUISINE



SEAFOOD CHOWDER AT EMBE EATERY

example of what I'm talking about. It's like performing surgery with a soup spoon before then using it to devour the guts of your patient. Except it's yummy and not grounds for malpractice or worse. There are a couple of schools of thought on the texture of the cheese on a bowl of French onion soup. Some like a good long stretchy pull on the cheese. I get it. Pizza has trained us well. Houlihan's has all the cheesy stretch you could ever want. There are also a few different schools of thought on the bread element of French onion soup. Some like a good slice of toasty bread to serve as a platform for the baked cheese that's to come. That's what Houlihan's offers. So not only do you have to cut through the stretchy cheese, you have to cut through the huge crouton on top. Again, that's all a feature, not a bug.

THE VAULT

There are also a few different schools of thought regarding the ratio of broth to onions. In this, as well as other aforementioned traits, the French onion soup at The Vault is on the other end of the spectrum. If you love more of that deep, savory-yet-not-without-sweetness broth that makes French onion soup what it is, then Houlihan's is for you. If you want spoonfuls of the caramelized onions that actually create that flavor, then get to The Vault. While I like the aesthetics of a good stretchy cheese on top, sometimes I can do without the hassle. There are blends of cheeses and other methods to prevent that off-inconvenient stretch, and The Vault has mastered them. You get a bit of a pull from the cheese, but it breaks well before it gets ridiculous. And whereas Houlihan's uses one big crouton, The Vault supports the cheese on a handful of their house croutons so you get a little bit of a welcome Italian influence on the soup, too. With its easy-to-manage cheese and its easy-to-spoon components, The Vault's French onion soup is one you can safely order on a date. Well... maybe have a mint handy, but the onions in French onion soup aren't likely to mess up your breath because they've already given all they've got. And who doesn't just want to straight-up kiss a bowl of French onion soup sometimes? The French onion soup is always available, but The Vault does some amazing things with soup rotation, in general. 'Tis the season for beer cheese soup, for example.

And last time I was in, they told me about their Hungarian mushroom soup. I've never had such a soup, but I'm imagining it's like a paprikash in soup form, and I'm excited to try it sometime soon.

PHO & RAMEN OOLONG ASIAN CUISINE BY KRISTINA NESTEBY

I'm a soup girl. Always have been, always will be. When I eat out, I don't often find an entree-sized soup. Sure, you can order a bowl of soup somewhere and call it a day, but that feels more like I ate three sides and not an entree. That's not so much the case at Oolong Asian Cuisine.

When my brain is telling me I want something warm, soothing, and soft, I get the pho. It's also my go-to food when I'm feeling under the weather. The beef bone broth simmers for hours, creating a base that is full of flavor without the shortcuts. I always add the jalapeno, torn-up Thai basil, and lime juice to my soup before giving it a good mix. The noodles are on the bottom of the bowl, and you'll want to grab them between your bites of sliced beef and meatballs. I also like to eat my pho with hoisin and sriracha. Some say it's a sin to mix them in the broth, but I'm not here to yuck your yum.

When you think of ramen, are you picturing a package of instant noodles and a tiny seasoning packet that will make your cardiologist scream? Clearly, you have not had the miso ramen at Oolong. The housemade chicken broth swirls around braised pork belly, sweet corn, mushrooms, and more. I suggest adding a marinated soft-boiled egg and giving it all a good mix so the noodles are easier to grab as you're scarfing down your bowl.

In either case, I like to take my leftovers home. Yes, the noodles get bloated, and yes, the nutritious properties of the soups degrade, but I love pouring the remaining broth and co. over a pile of warm rice.

A note on to-go soups: If you order either soup for carry out or delivery, the liquids and solids will be separated. Make sure you heat the liquid up BEFORE pouring it into the bowl; this is how you reheat your ingredients and finish cooking the noodles.

CREAM OF MUSHROOM & SEAFOOD CHOWDER EMBE EATERY

BY KRISTINA NESTEBY

I don't know who introduced me to Embe. Was it 365 or Slip Silo or a random lazy stroll down Main Street that drew me in? Whatever the case may be, I'm grateful for my many encounters with Embe. Or more specifically, their soups (and bread pudding). They will warm your bones after you've spent too much time circling downtown for a parking spot. But the wait is absolutely worth it.


I usually get a cup of the cream of mushroom along with a sandwich. The base itself is mushroomy, but you'll also find artichoke hearts and sundried tomatoes in the mix. Its menu mate, the seafood chowder, hosts a blend of seafood chunks, sweet corn, and celery in a hearty, creamy soup. Both soups are excellent, and if you're feeling extra soupy, I'd suggest getting a cup of both. As with most soups, they reheat well if you have leftovers, so don't be afraid to try them out. Embe usually has a third soup of the kale and blue cheese variety, but neither Bryce nor I have tried yet. Have you? Let us know your thoughts!




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