

# Soup Sisters

united by the spirit of giving



By Dawn Matheson

Photography • Nick Iwanysyn

**IT'S A MONDAY EVENING** in September and the chill of fall is already upon us. Guelph's 39 Carden Street is hosting a houseful of hens for a soup-making extravaganza. Hoots of laughter pour out of the steamed-up patio doors to the cosy downtown restaurant abuzz with 20 women chopping, slopping and stirring some 66 litres of soup, made fresh from scratch over one evening. All to be given away.

Earlier in the evening, Victoria Edge hollered her hello to the aproned women busy drinking goblets of red and white and popping hors d'oeuvres. Edge, the lead organizer of this

movement in Guelph and an epidemiologist at Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health by day, filled the crowd in on Soup Sisters, a grassroots, non-profit organization founded in Calgary in 2009. The soup they make will go to women and children affected by domestic abuse.

"Guelph is the 20th Canadian city to participate!" she says.

Woot Woot! goes the crowd. Clink Clink! go the glasses.

It's a simple idea. Once a month, Soup Sisters participants — which can include women and men (a.k.a. Broth Brothers) — sign up online ([soupsisters.org/guelph.php](http://soupsisters.org/guelph.php)) to make soup. Across the country, about 10,000 servings of soup are boiled up and donated each month.

**Left:** Beverly Trist-Stewart of the Rotary Club of Guelph stirs a pot at 39 Carden Street in Guelph.

**Above:** Two women prepare ingredients for soup, which will be donated to Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis.



In Guelph, the recipient is Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis, an organization that provides services to women and children affected by abuse. Four varieties of soup are delivered monthly to a dedicated freezer at the shelter, known as Marianne's Place, since Guelph's inaugural event in October of 2014.

The evening costs \$55 per person: \$40 pays for all ingredients, including the wine and hors d'oeuvres, and \$15 goes back into the organization for operations.

Edge first got wind of the program when she was gifted the bestselling "Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers Cookbook." More than 100 soup recipes from Canadian celebrity chefs, such as Bonnie Stern, Lucy Waverman, Anna Olson and Elizabeth Baird, plus those from Soup Sisters' many volunteers across the country, form the Soup Sisters' bible.

"Guelph is such a social and generous community, I knew it had to happen here." Though it did take her about a year to find all the right partners.

"This certainly isn't a one-woman job," continues Edge, as she pulls up the two other co-ordinators to the microphone — also colleagues from public health — Jane Parmley and Mariola Mascarenhas.

"But this could never have happened if it weren't for Becky," Edge grins as she pokes her head into the kitchen to locate her.

Instead, an animated charmer of a woman grabs the mike. "I birthed her!" This is Becky Hood's mother, Fran. Becky peeks out from the kitchen and gives the crowd an eye roll. We are in for some mother bragging.

The soup means so much. I've had women in the shelter who have never had someone make them a birthday cake. They can't believe people will pay to make them soup."

Jennifer Bailey, Women in Crisis chef

"For any of you out there who are mothers, you know what it's like. Look at this girl!" she beams while listing off the young 39 Carden Street chef's accolades: 40 under 40 with the Guelph Mercury, a contestant on the Food Network's cooking competition show "Chopped Canada" (which she dedicated to her mother) and on and on, until Becky gives her the zip-it sign.

"Enough, Mom," says the younger Hood, as she takes the mike and cuts to the chase to talk food, a subject of which she is obviously more comfortable.

The chef lays out the night's plan. There are four tables (each has a raised tabletop built by volunteer Parmley) serving as soup-making stations stocked with cutting boards, knives, a burner and a huge pot. Five participants are preassigned to each table (to avoid allergies and to match companions together). Above each table is a blackboard artfully listing ingredients for each of the four soups.

Tonight we make potato leek, turkey meatball, squash pear parsnip and sausage minestrone.

Over in the corner are baskets piled high with a cornucopia of fall's bounty: vegetables and herbs soon to be boiled into liquid but, in this form, make for a beautiful still life.

There's something about soup. Some call it "a sweater for your insides," others, "love in a bowl." Describe it as you wish, it has always been considered healing. It's no wonder the hot broth formed the foundation for the first public restaurants in 18th-century Paris as "restoratifs," from which the word "restaurant" was derived.

"Turkey meatball is the most challenging," says Hood, "but the most fun. We'll need two people with gloves to make the meatballs."

Turns out, turkey meatball is also the most popular at the shelter, "especially for the kids," Edge adds, with some sadness.

"You have your recipes on your chalkboards, but you are the experts here — add your own flare." Hood continues, "Taste your soup. Salt it; throw in what you think it needs. I'm not going to yell at you like Gordon Ramsay."

The young chef heads through the crowd over to a table to give a little demo in chopping. "Just watch this," her mom beams.

"When you cut yourself — and someone always does — let us know. We've got the first-aid kit," Hood points out.

"No problem!" shouts one of the ladies. "We have a doctor in the house." Dr. Anne-Marie Zajdlík, well known for her "Hope" campaign for HIV/AIDS care in Africa, shushes the woman good-naturedly from the back of the crowd.

Tonight's group is made up of women mostly from the Rotary Club of Guelph, of which Zajdlík is a member. They booked months earlier in order to nab the reservations and had a long waiting list at Rotary for any cancellations.

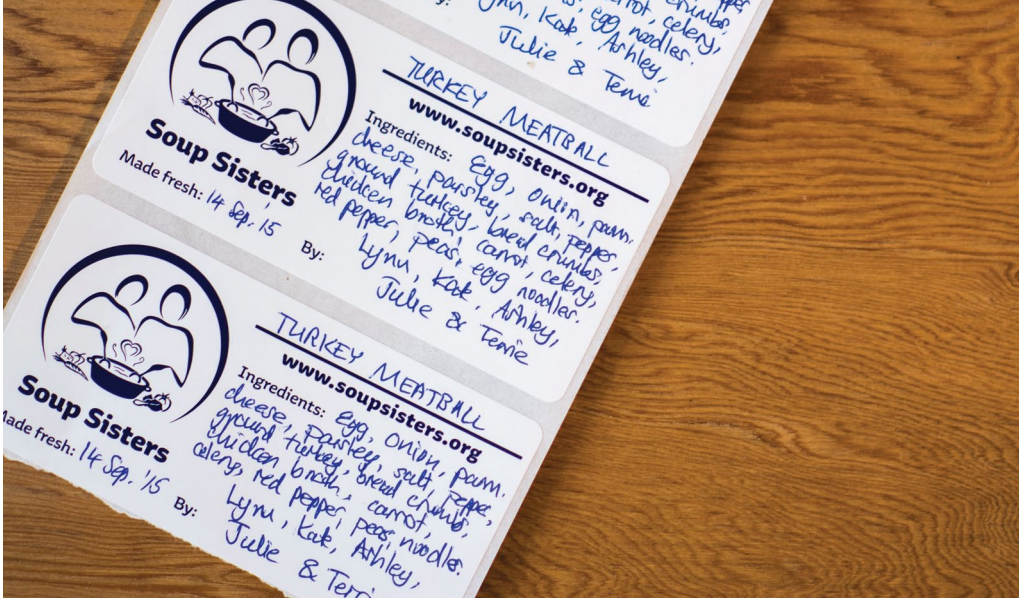
Three younger gal pals, not with Rotary,

**Left:** Friends Julie Matthews, Kate Drohan and Ashley Sanvido chop vegetables.

**Centre:** Julie Matthews and Lynne McCurdy.

**Right:** Anne Pennock, Sharron Watson and Anne-Marie Zajdlík.

**Top right:** Each container of soup is labelled, signed and dated.





## What is Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis?

Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis is a community-based organization providing services to women and their children who have or are experiencing domestic or sexual violence. This includes Marianne's Place (a 28-bed shelter), a Transitional and Housing Support Program, Family Court Support Program, Rural Women's Support Program, Sexual Assault Centre and 24-hour crisis line.

All of Women in Crisis's services are free and include risk assessments, safety planning, one-on-one counselling, group counselling, workshops, emergency shelter, transitional planning, housing and legal support, custody and access support, victim-impact statements and court preparation, advocacy and public education. In 2014, Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis responded to 2,528 calls, supported 1,086 women and 67 children through the sexual assault, transition and rural programs. The organization has received 2,500 servings of soup from Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers over the past 10 months.

had reserved the first three spots last February.

"We have no problem booking these events," said Edge. "We get birthday parties, office groups, many repeat customers."

It seems people like to perform charity with their hands. "This is active giving. It's very clear exactly where your money is going."

Though, not perfectly clear, and it shouldn't be. The volunteer cooks won't meet the recipients, at least not intentionally. Anonymity is extremely important in shelters for women and children fleeing abuse. The bridge here is Women in Crisis's in-house chef, Jennifer Bailey, who attends Soup Sisters events to "help out with dishes or whatever the girls need." She happens to

be sick tonight. I reach her by phone the next day.

"Our food budget at the shelter is very poor," says Bailey, who has been cooking at Women in Crisis for eight years. She works with \$3.50 to \$4 per client per day. Chef Bailey tells me that Women in Crisis has a much smaller food budget than prisons, noting the irony in the injustice.

"The soup means so much. I've had women in the shelter who have never had someone make them a birthday cake. They can't believe people will pay to make them soup." Back at the chopping block, chef Hood has chosen to demo the slicing of a leek to the circle of mostly middle-aged women. "The greener the leaves, the stronger the flavour." Hood talks knives, hand position, what to discard, what to keep and how thick. Her mom eggs her on. "Show them how fast you can chop, honey." Others yell out food trivia. "Why are leeks so dirty?" And one out of nowhere: "Why does corn have hair?" I never did hear the answers over the chuckling.

Hood moves on to onion. "Nobody can ever cut an onion. I don't know why. Chop off the ends first." I hear her mom say to a lady next to her, "She can do it much faster than that."

"OK, wash up and hair back," hollers chef Becky. It's time to get cooking!

And so begins a night of tears, which I could never quite determine if they were due to the onions, the laughter or the sadness for the necessity of such an event.

Fran Hood makes her way over to me. She is a talker, for which I'm grateful since I'm looking for a story. I ask her about cooking: Where did her daughter learn this?

"Her grandmother. Becky grew up without much. We lived on a corner of her grandparents' farm in the Flamborough area. It was a pig and beef farm. We got most of our



Chef Becky Hood with her mother, Fran.

Photography • Mai Pham

food from the garden. Grandmother made do with whatever we could find."

Fran Hood tells stories of dozens of people around the outdoor table. "We had no money, but always room for anyone who wanted to share a meal."

Fran shares some of the hardships of her own: stage-four cancer when the kids were teens, for one.

In addition to her daughter as chef, Fran Hood has a personal connection to the Soup Sisters event. She is the intake worker with the sexual assault team at Guelph General Hospital. "I'm often the doorway to the women's domestic assault system."

Mom Hood also makes the brownies for these events. "Oooh, the women love them! Once I switched them up for lemon squares and I was scolded! The brownies are coveted."

I make sure to pop a few into my mouth, and boy, was she right.

I ask chef Becky to share a wine with me out on the front patio. It was hot inside, and the noise levels were getting pretty high.

"I never thought this would work," Hood confesses. "We're a small restaurant. We needed taller tables. We needed all the tools, the people. We'd have to close the restaurant and lose that income."

But Edge was very convincing. When the inaugural event was upon them, the team



Photography • Mai Pham

Organizers Mariola Mascarenhas, Victoria Edge, Jane Parmley and chef Jennifer Bailey from Women in Crisis.

made it into an open house.

"I just couldn't believe it worked! The mayor came. People were so into it."

Hood tells me that she's seen up close what giving can do for others, and she

wanted to give back.

"It sounds corny, but it kind of restores your faith in humanity."

I ask her if she has a connection to the charity besides her mom's work at the

hospital. "I tear up at these events," Hood says, telling me she was in what she described as a very violent relationship in the past. She managed to get out. She sought help and found help.

This revelation takes me by surprise, but it shouldn't, considering half of the women in Canada have experienced sexual or physical abuse since the age of 16, according to a Statistics Canada survey.

"The women that are getting the soup — I'm not there now, but I've been there. I've been at my darkest and I'm out — I hope they see that there is hope."

Hood describes her current relationship as absolutely beautiful and wants the women at the shelter to know they will be OK, too.

"It is just soup, but if it brings some hope, it helps."

We look in through the window and see all these women genuinely wanting to be here.

"Food always brings people together," says



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### Turkey Meatball Soup

This is the recipe for Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi’s Turkey Meatball Soup as published in the “Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers Cookbook.”

#### Meatballs

- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup grated onion
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 4 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 2 lbs (900 grams) lean ground turkey
- Bread crumbs, as needed

In a bowl, combine eggs, onion, Parmesan cheese, parsley, salt and pepper. Mix in turkey. Add bread crumbs if needed. Shape into balls one tablespoon at a time. Bake on a parchment-lined baking sheet at 375 degrees F for about 15 minutes.

#### Soup

- 16 cups (4 litres) chicken broth
- 6 green onions, thinly sliced
- 2 cups carrots, sliced
- 2 cups celery, sliced
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 3 cups chopped sweet red pepper
- 1 package (375 grams) vermicelli egg noodles
- 2 cups peas

In a pot, add broth and bring to a boil. Add green onions, carrots, celery, pepper and thyme. Heat, cover and simmer for 10 minutes. Add red pepper and egg noodles. Simmer, covered, until pasta is al dente. Add peas. Before ladling the soup into the individual containers, divide up the meatballs as equally as you can.

Hood. “And soup is simple and wholesome. Just like how I like to cook. I always say: I love the taste of a dirty carrot.” Just then, Caitlin Heximer, one of 39 Carden’s owners, who hosts at these events and volunteers as bartender, calls Hood in for a bread crumb emergency. “The turkey meatballers need more panko!”

Inside, Rotarian Terrie Jarvis of the turkey meatball crew has her hands covered in ground meat. “I was on the Rotary waiting list for a spot and I’m so glad I got on! It’s wonderful being with all these other ladies. I’m not a foodie. I’m here for what food does.” She echoes Hood’s comments. “It brings people together.”

Jarvis, too, has a connection to the charity, not personally, but her daughter is an activist for reporting domestic abuse. “All the victim-shaming is terrible. So this is important to me.” Her crew includes the three younger women who are not Rotarians but friends who just wanted to share the experience. “My mom, sister-in-law and I each gave one another a January Soup Sisters’ night for Christmas last year. We usually sponsor a donkey or something, but this is so hands-on, so direct and so fun,” says Kate Drohan, who returned tonight with two friends in tow. Last time, Drohan says the organizers listed all the things the shelter needed. “Since I’m an extreme couponer, I have been collecting things for the last nine months! I have a big box in my car of toothpaste and personal items to send along with the soup.” I tell Edge about this, and she is delighted but not surprised. “The women that come here are really rooting for the clients at the shelter.” By this time, the soup making is done and many women are sitting around the tables, handwriting the ingredients on the labels, signing off with a team name. “My favourites have been Baby Got Bolognese and Noodle Chix,” says chef Bailey. Everyone sits down to more wine, a bowl of soup of their choice and homemade bread. Edge announces the Battle of the Soups. The ladies had been instructed to concoct a presentation arguing the merits of their soup over the others. Potato leek garners the most applause with quotes by Dr. Zajdlík throughout, in jest, bestowing the magical medicinal qualities of the leek. We’ve been at it for three hours, but the night isn’t over for chef Becky and Edge. They still have to pack up all the soup into Edge’s vehicle and drive it over to Marianne’s Place. “It’s a long night, but I love this part,” says Edge. “Just seeing the ladies in the lounge. They want to know what’s coming. What soups are we bringing for them tonight? It warms my heart.”





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