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Frugal Foodie - The Original Soup Man

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By Stefanie Ellis

Photograph by Katherine Bish

I promised myself I wouldn't make a corny joke. It would be too easy to start off a story about the man who gave Seinfeld the fodder for that ubiquitous "no soup for you!" line with a joke about soup.

I just wasn't going to soup, I mean *stoop*, to that level. No matter how much I may have been craving kitsch, this journalist was going to stick to her gustatory guns.

But then the unexpected happened. There was no soup when I showed up at the Original Soup Man.

I had arrived an hour before closing, and by that time most of the soups were on their last leg, with just enough in each pot for a mere taste. Was this a joke? The punch line seemed way too obvious:

No soup for me!

According to several media stories, real-life soup man Al Yeganeh, whose Soup Kitchen International in New York City grabbed Jerry Seinfeld's attention, doesn't like to be associated with the character made so famous on *Seinfeld*. For starters, Yeganeh finds the "N" word (not that "N" word—the one that rhymes with Yahtzee) offensive, and he doesn't like being depicted as brash and unforgiving.

Still, Yeganeh's chain that's now in culinary syndication across the United States lists, on its website, quite a few rules. And most of them will sound vaguely familiar to anyone who's ever seen the infamous *Seinfeld* episode: "For the most efficient and fastest service, the line must be kept moving. Pick the soup you want! Have your money ready! Move to the extreme left after ordering!"

And, oh yeah, *no returns!*

That one I can follow. It's good soup.

Take the lobster bisque. The cup was filled—almost embarrassingly so—with chunks of lobster, white



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onions, carrots, celery, parsley and red peppers. The broth was rich and luscious, owing most likely to a good lobster stock and a bit of sherry, but the rest is a mystery. For the most part, bisque is bisque, but this one offered up a taste that had been places, not just in a can on a shelf.

The small taste I got of the butternut squash soup reminded me of a walk through a pumpkin patch on a chilly October evening, a cup of sweet, cinnamon-laced apple cider in hand. It was delicious, but gone. My hopes were squashed.

My morale was still low when I found out there was only enough corn chowder to fill half of a cup. Even my spoon looked sad as it lifted the chicken stock-based soup filled with sweet yellow corn, white onions, red peppers, carrots, spinach, celery and white-meat chicken to my lips. A tiny bit of cream made the soup more elegant, and there was a lingering sweetness in every bite.

Soup prices are a bit steep considering the portion size—\$8 for an 8-ounce cup of lobster bisque. In New York, people might be accustomed to paying \$1 per ounce for soup, but in St. Louis that's a little high. But as much as Yeganeh may dislike his fictional, fascist doppleganger, this is where the *Seinfeld* fame works to his benefit: If people can tell their friends they got their soup from "the soup guy from *Seinfeld*," they'll probably be more willing to shovel out some crackers to get it.

The small wedge of bread, piece of fruit and chocolate that accompany each order might sweeten the deal, but the real treats are the smiles you get from those serving you. I didn't have to stand to the left or look down at my feet. In fact, I carried on a lengthy conversation while lingering over the menu—a breach of the rules that you'd think would be a no-no for a place whose reputation is built on brevity.

But that's the thing about St. Louis. Neither *Seinfeld* nor the Soup Man is hereto tell me what to do. Wait, did you hear that voice? OK, OK, I'll keep moving.

612 N. 11th, 314-621-6736, originalsoupman.com. Hours: 10 a.m.–7 p.m. Mon–Sat. & during Rams home games.

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