



# Soup Segá!

*Culturally-driven soup  
keeps organization cooking*

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*If you're in search of a novel holiday gift idea that will impress even the most discerning foodies on your list, then drive on over to the Bulgarian-Macedonian National Educational and Cultural Center (BMNECC) in West Homestead this Saturday and pick up a few quarts of frozen soup. It's a gift not to be forgotten.*



Suffused into each pot of soup is a rich cultural heritage that stretches all the way back to the generation of immigrants who built this city; this melting pot we call Pittsburgh. Established in 1930, and located at 449 W 8th Ave. in the Bulgarian community of West Homestead, the BMNECC was one of the founding nationalities of the Pittsburgh Folk Festival 50 years ago.

According to BMNECC president Patricia French of Mount Lebanon, "Our purpose is to preserve and perpetuate the culture of the Bulgarians and Macedonians." And in an era when many ethnic clubs are being forced to downsize or close, the BMNECC is thriving on a veritable sea of soup.

An ethnic Bulgarian, 76 year old French belongs to one of the organization's founding families and was the brainchild behind their most profitable and popular fundraising effort ever. "We used to have spaghetti dinners once a week," she recalls, but the profits from pasta weren't going far. And then it came to her in a dream...

"My late husband, Bill, was a colonel in the US Army, and every day during the 36 years of our marriage his lunch was always the same: two bowls of soup and a glass of milk. That's all he ever ate, and he would never eat canned soup," she recalls. Then in 1998, ten years after his death, the group was in desperate need of a fundraiser, when the image of Bill eating his daily soup came to Pat in a dream.

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laughed at the notion of a soup sale. "I called all the young women and asked them what they thought of the idea, and they said it sounded good. One girl came up with the name Soup Segã because it was the only word she knew in Bulgarian. Segã means now. Soup now."

French collected a variety of native Bulgarian recipes and put Angel Roy (41) of Penn Hills in charge of the operation. "I've always loved to cook, and I somehow got involved, and the next thing I know, I'm in charge of the whole thing," says Roy, with a sidewise glance at French. "They have a way of giving you responsibilities without you even knowing it."

Nevertheless, Soup Segã became a runaway hit from the moment they sold their first quart eight years ago. "A whole bunch of us cooked for about a month and made all the soup that we thought needed to make. Then there was an article about our soup sale published in the newspaper, and on the first day that we were open, we sold maybe 150 quarts of soup. We were sold out by 11:30 a.m., and we just looked at each other," recalls Roy.

"We had 15 soups at the time, and the whole next week we spent every night making all 15 soups, one type of each, all over again for the next week." Their rate of sales eventually simmered down, but Roy says that the group has always had a steady clientele.

That first year, they netted \$10,000. Says French with a smile, "The year all started happened to be a



Children and adults and the presentation of cultural programs and performances with the nationally-acclaimed Bulgarian Folk Dance Ensemble "Otets Paissi" and the Bulgarian Folk Orchestra.

The BMNECC is currently holding a capital campaign for the next three years with the goal of raising \$1.5 million to renovate and expand its 70-year-old building. In addition, they recently received an anonymous gift of \$75,000 from a foundation to expand their culinary operation, which will enable them to build a much-needed new kitchen.

"See that cubby hole?" says Angèl, pointing out the woefully small, outdated kitchen. "When we've got five pots of soup on the stove and then we have to take them downstairs to fill them in containers because we don't have room here, we need a new kitchen - desperately."

Another grant for \$150,000 recently came from a federally-funded program called Save America's Treasures. French says that money will go towards the preservation and continuation of the group's already strong ties to its community, noting that a surprising amount of members (including Angèl Roy) are not of Bulgarian descent.

"People wanted their kids to dance with our dance group. But one of our rules was you had to be a member to dance with our group. So we decided in the late 1970's that we should open up our membership to people whose kids were interested and who were interested in our mission, which was preserving the culture of the Bulgarians. This is how Angèl got into it," recalls French, noting that young people are the key to the preservation of ethnic organizations. "This is why many ethnic groups are dying off: because they never involved their young people. Involving non-Bulgarians has been our salvation and one of the greatest things that's happened to us."

Despite the fact that she's not Bulgarian, Roy has become an expert on Bulgarian food. "I buy most of my ingredients at Restaurant Depot, a trade store in the Strip District," she says, "and I buy some Bulgarian specialty ingredients from Saloniki, which is a great store that carries Bulgarian and Turkish foods. And if necessary, I'll also go to Costco. But 90 percent of what I get is from Restaurant Depot. They sell everything for restaurants: veggies, meat, paper products, equipment, etc... It's a good bargain for this type of business."

Roy says that typical Bulgarian ingredients include mint and dill. "Like most Eastern Europeans, they're

high. cabbage & tomato and... they're... the top three.

Using a core group of six to seven regular volunteers, Roy starts making soups in mid-August to prepare for their September opening, and then they replenish their supply as necessary throughout the season. "I have those people who I can count on a weekly basis, and everyone's encouraged to contribute time and recipes."

Soup Segà runs annually from September to May, every Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon and closes before Memorial Day because of the Pittsburgh Folk Festival. "We're busy cooking for that," notes French.

Sold in half-quart or quart-sized containers, the BMNECC regularly offers 10 standard varieties of vegetarian soup, including Dobrudja Potato & Leek, Balkan Bean, North Bulgaria Spicy Tomato with Dumplings, Strandja Spinach & Rice and Pirin White Bean, to name a few; and four varieties of non-vegetarian soups, including Shope Beef & Barley, Pirin Cream of Potato, North Bulgaria Meatball Noodle and Thracian Chicken with Dumplings. Vegetarian varieties cost \$5 a quart, and Non-vegetarian varieties cost \$6 a quart. The BMNECC also sells gift certificates.

Monthly specials like October's Indian Mulligatawny, November's Mediterranean Spiced Pumpkin and December's English Chestnut are seasonally inspired. Roy recommends that customers call her to make reservations two weeks before the specials are offered so that she may make enough. Monthly specials sell for \$6 a quart.

Soups are sold either frozen or fresh out of the pot, and French says that some customers arrive with coolers big enough to fit at least a dozen quarts. "And then they come back a month later," she says, noting that specials like September's Spicy African Yam soup are much anticipated.

Roy points out that all the soups are made with fresh ingredients and are low-salt, low-fat and contain no preservatives whatsoever. "Working parents who need to provide a quick, wholesome meal; vegetarians; office workers -- the soup is a hit with all age groups," she notes, adding that they began selling half-quarts to accommodate senior citizens who only want enough for one meal at a time.

With pride, French notes that the BMNECC is unique, "Many organizations sell pierogies, kielbasa, halushki, spaghetti and cookies, but we're the only ones selling soup."



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