

## RESTAURANT REVIEW

# Taking Soup To The Next Level

*Zoup! Fresh Soup Company looks to expand its one-of-a-kind concept with new locations.*

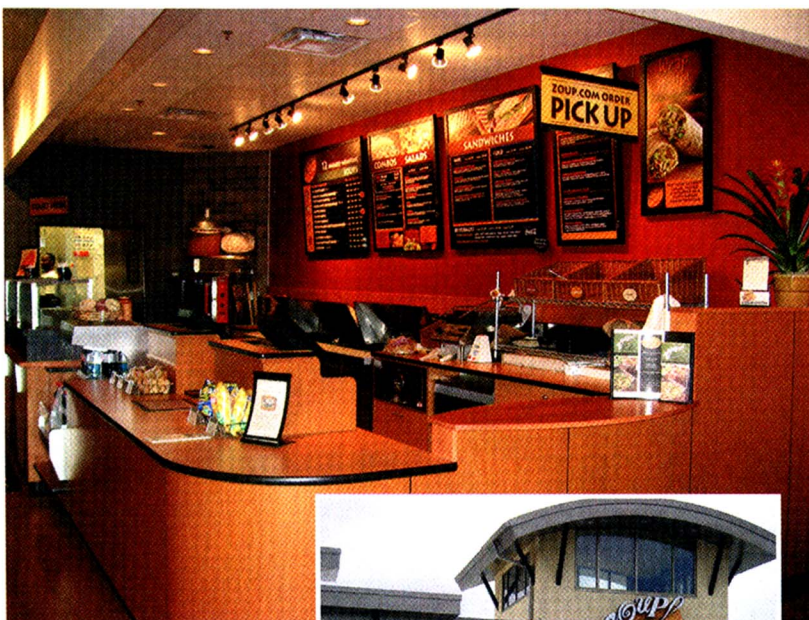
Lindsay Sport

Throughout many restaurants, soup is treated as somewhat of an afterthought — a quaint precursor to a decadent meal or a last-minute addition to a sandwich or salad. And in most cases, authentic, handcrafted, fresh soups are hard to find. That's why Eric Ersher founded Zoup! Fresh Soup Company, a fast-casual soup concept that is defining the category with its varied array of one-of-a-kind soups. First opened in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan, in 1998, Zoup! has filled a niche for consumers as the only soup-differentiated brand of its kind.

Ersher developed the idea for Zoup! while working for his previous venture, a Detroit-based spice business that produced different spice blends for small restaurant chains. The company eventually evolved into producing a price-driven soup line, which allowed Ersher the opportunity to access multiple kitchens to see what they were serving. What he noticed, Ersher says, is that throughout the industry, soup was not treated as a priority and was typically a low-quality item used to reduce food costs.

This got the businessman wondering: was there an unutilized opportunity for soup in the restaurant industry?

"I started asking around and the consensus was clear — good soup, really good soup, was hard to find," says Ersher, who



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is founder and managing partner of Zoup! Fresh Soup Company. "The other thing I noticed was that soup, unlike any other

food, seemed to bring up thoughts of comfort, family and certain intangible associations."

Ersher felt like he had his answer, and set out to fill the void for good, quality soup in a convenient, fast-casual format.

He hired a chef and for the first year worked diligently to create different recipes, testing them on friends and family, until they finally developed their list of more than 100 proprietary recipes. The team opened their first Zoup! location with success, and within 5 years the

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company added five more Detroit-area locations. The brand began franchising in 2004, and now Zoup! stands at 25 locations across six states — Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Connecticut and New Jersey.

With a strong foundation and a more-established distribution, Zoup! is now looking to ramp up expansion, set to expand to 35 locations by the end of this year and targeting to hit 50 locations in 2011 and 70 locations in 2012.

The brand typically looks for approximately 2,000 square feet of space, mainly inline locations with high-density and a large white-collar daytime population. For expansion, Zoup! is looking to grow in the Midwest and East with single or multiple store deals, while expanding in the Northern-half of the country, west of Wisconsin and Illinois, solely through multi-unit development deals.

And while the brand may have found success with its initial presence in the Midwest, Zoup! is proving that its soup concept is more than just a regional hit. “As we continue to grow outward from our Midwest base, the concept definitely seems to resonate with consumers and we’ve seen higher sales in even the newer markets,” says Ersher.

One factor that Ersher attributes to the brand’s success is, of course, its focus on soup. Each location features 12 rotating daily varieties of soups, of which always include at least one low-fat, vegetarian, dairy-free and spicy recipe a day. “We have a large variety of really, really high-quality soups, and I think that having soup as a point of differentiation within an already growing fast-casual segment has benefited us,” Ersher says. “I think people see soup as a healthful yet fast alternative, and the variety of soups and always-changing menu is appealing to customers.”

While soup is definitely the differentiation of the Zoup! brand, each restaurant also offers made-to-order salads and sandwiches. And with the concept’s

relatively simple menu, new locations do not require food-service intensive build out, which allows Ersher and his team to recruit franchisee candidates that are much more consumer-focused and able to understand the founding principals that form the basis of the company’s operating philosophies, known as “Zoup!isms.”

“We’ve gotten pretty good at picking operators that really do understand the brand, understand our what we call ‘Zoup!isms,’ which are part of our cultural under-pinnings,” he says.

Ersher and his team focus on providing strong foundations for their franchisees with a number of resources targeted to ensure their success, such as an in-house store designer and architect, who helps to simplify the build out process and aids with construction management. Zoup! also provides in-house marketing and graphics for a unified and branded look, as well as training support to help franchisees both before and after opening.

With Zoup!’s established presence and well-formatted brand, Ersher says the concept is ready to expand, bringing its unique concept to more customers nationwide.

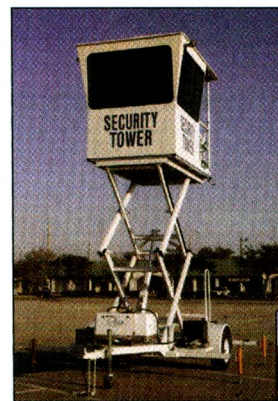
“We grew slowly and very deliberately, with a view towards building a very strong foundation for future growth, and that future is here,” Ersher says. **SCB**



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