

Staying connected — one bowl at a time

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Katrina Didot found her passion making soup inspired by countries all over the world. Didot, who spent years living abroad, now makes soups for Earth & Tea Cafe.

Photo by Mindi Westhoff

A cow is mooing in Katrina Didot's dining room. She excuses herself and hunts around the table, before she picks up her cell phone — the source of the moo — and answers.

"Hola!" she says, launching into a quick discussion in rapid-fire Spanish. She finishes, saying, "Si. Si. Caribbean? Okay."

She hangs up and shouts to her husband, Ernie, "Earth and Tea Café needs more soup! They need a gallon of Caribbean Coconut Stew."

Didot, former owner of "A Bowl of Good," which was located in Kate's Natural Products, and author of a blog by the same name, is the name behind the succulent stews at the new downtown café. She speaks Spanish fluently, along with a little bit of French Creole, and maybe some Pokimche, a dialect in Guatemala.



If this is a surprise, it probably shouldn't be. The name of her restaurant, "A Bowl of Good" was a double entendre: the soup is indeed full of goodness, but so is its intent. As a social worker for 14 years, Didot saw social and economic strife firsthand. Now, in her second career, she still considers herself a social worker, devoted to filling bellies with comfort.

Didot, 39, has spent her life doing good. Her parents showed her the way early on. When she was 11 years old, her parents began providing in-home care for the elderly at their house. "Growing up, there were always three or four elderly people in our house," she says. "We had the most interesting people living with us."

She studied social work at Messiah College, with two years of course work at Temple University in Philadelphia. Her first job after graduation was helping integrate Vietnamese refugees in Philadelphia in the late '80s. Soon after, she moved to Haiti to promote literacy with a group called Beyond Borders.

"Literacy is very low there, and many of them are in indentured servanthood," she says.

"Older children, maybe 10 or 11, would go live with richer family members in the city."

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, and her roommates left, one due to illness, another for a death in the family. Left alone, her survival instincts kicked in.

"It was one of the best experiences I ever had," she says. "I depended on my neighbors a lot. They taught me how to cook."

She met her husband in Haiti. Both shared a sense of civic duty and compassion, she says. "We decided we were meant to be together," she says. "We were both interested in the same kinds of things."

The couple moved to Washington, D.C., where Katrina pursued a graduate degree in social work from Catholic University. While they lived in D.C., she worked with the city's Crime Victims Assistant Program, which counseled victims of violent crimes. The experience was eye-opening, she says. In Haiti, she had worked to help improve the quality of life, but in D.C., she was trying to help people whose lives had been shattered by violence.

"When I got back from Haiti and was working in D.C., I kept thinking, 'This is the Third World,'" she says.

Living in D.C. wore on the Didots and they began thinking about going to Guatemala. They joined an organization called Food for the Hungry, and moved to Nisnic, Guatemala, where they lived among the Pokomchi people. They quickly learned that Spanish (the official language of Guatemala) is not spoken as much as native dialects.

They recruited some local children to record educational videos in their native dialects, interpreting biblical stories in their own cultures. Katrina says, with pride, that the videos are still shown, 12 years later, in the villages every Saturday night on televisions provided by aid workers.

During the eight years the Didots lived in Guatemala, Katrina cooked with the Guatemalan women, learning to make chicken soup and tamales. They adopted two children, Luther, 9, and Eva, 7, who attend Waterman Elementary School. They returned to the states in 2003 to be closer to their families.

"We started feeling a sense of wanting to be near our parents and wanting the children to know this culture," she says. Ernie was a JMU alumnus and Katrina had grown up visiting family in the area, so they moved to Harrisonburg. Within a year, their parents joined them. She initially continued social work, doing intensive in-home therapy around the area. But when she had the opportunity to open a café in the same building as Kate's Natural Products, she was intrigued.

"Along the way, I had done some informal catering," she says. "I always thought it would be a neat business with the kids when they got older, because they could get involved."

Her cooking is purely instinctual; she is the first to admit her soups aren't always ethnically authentic, but she tries to capture the spirit of world cuisine. She simply works with what is available.

"In Haiti and Guatemala, we had the market and other than that, we had to make do," she says. "When I came back, I continued cooking in that vein of 'What can I do with these ingredients?'"

They decided to name the café "A Bowl of Good" because Ernie always commented that her soups were just "bowls full of good stuff." She was in business for a year and a half, but when the owners received a better offer for the space, she decided to close up shop in August.

Since then, she has been posting regularly to her blog, www.abowlofgood.com, selling her soups and nine-grain bread at the farmer's market downtown and is now supplying all the soups for Earth & Tea Café downtown. Her soup, it seems, fills a niche.

"Restaurants need something more to offer than minestrone or chicken soup," she says. Now she is renting the kitchen of Blue Nile Ethiopian Cuisine to cook in every Monday. But if the demand for her Caribbean Coconut Stew is any indication, she may need more space.

"Already I'm seeing I'll need more kitchen time," she says.

She's considering opening a café once again, maybe in the Friendly City Co-op, but she isn't sure yet. She's received calls from as far away as Farmville to supply her soups, but she doesn't know if she's ready for that just yet. She wants to continue her social work — filling bellies — in the 'Burg.

"I'm an earthy, organic type of person," she says. "I like the connection with people."