

Restaurant Review

Soothing Soups When the Mercury Plummets, Take the Kids Out for Comfort in a Bowl

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

For those who enjoy chopping and stirring, whipping up a pot of soup can be relaxing. But sometimes, you want someone else to do the simmering. Fortunately, it's easy to find terrific soups throughout Silicon Valley. Here are three kid-friendly spots with a terrific selection.

Sweet Peas Café & Catering

453 N. Santa Cruz Ave., Los Gatos. 408-354-3144

This adorable café is best known for its crepes, quiches, sandwiches, and omelets. But their best-kept secret just may be their homemade soups. A chalkboard behind the counter lists the day's three from-scratch selections, an impressive variety for a place so tiny. Cups are \$3.50, bowls \$4.75, and all soups come with fresh bread and butter.

Excellent selections include the velvety butternut soup, a deep orange puree of squash that clings to your spoon; the corn chowder, bursting with sweet corn, celery, and diced bell pepper; and the super-thick split pea soup with chunks of soft carrots and potatoes. Each would please both adult and kid palates, and you'll find yourself swiping the perimeter of your bowl with your bread to get every last drop. For non-soup eaters, a kids' menu includes smaller crepes, grilled cheese sandwiches, and peanut butter and jelly.

Upside: Highchairs and changing tables, neighborhood feel, extensive menu of kid favorites
Downside: With only six tables inside and six outside, it can get crowded. Plan to come during off-peak hours.

Zanotto's Family Market

1970 Naglee Ave., San Jose. 408-294-9151.

For those with grocery shopping on the to-do list, heading to Zanotto's for a hot soup lunch makes good sense. The upscale market offers traditional groceries plus high-end prepared foods and a well-stocked deli. But it's the soup that will make you a regular. One side of the store houses a homey, sit-down café with large tables, a bakery case with made-to-order panini, and a soup bar with eight varieties. Each soup I tried was exceptionally well-seasoned and full of colorful vegetables. My 6-year-old went batty for the cheese ravioli minestrone, bursting

with pasta, kidney beans, vegetables and herbs. Also excellent: the mildly spiced Mama Rosa's pasta fagioli with Italian sausage, packed with tender beans, elbow macaroni, and veggies. Word of caution: the soup (\$4.99/pound) is exceptionally hot. If you're in a hurry, get it to go and let it cool off at home. If not, plan to stay awhile so it can lose some of its tongue-scorching heat.

Upside: Huge variety of soup plus onsite grocery, large outdoor patio, easy parking

Downside: Grocery store décor; soup is extremely hot, unappealing bathroom ill-suited to changing diapers, only one highchair.

Maru Ichi

368 Castro St., Mountain View. 650-564-9931

If your children think ramen comes prepackaged with a salty spice envelope, hightail it over to Maru Ichi for an education. This noodle house is ramen-central, and it will forever change the way you and your family think about noodle soup.

To the left of the entryway sits a glassed-in corner where a noodle-maker feeds fresh dough into a giant metal contraption. The machine then compresses the dough into long sheets, which will ultimately be cut into squiggles. Take a seat at the U-shaped counter or at one of the comfortable red booths – there are plenty of high chairs, and on weekends

the place brims with young families.

Children's meals include a choice of ramen and a Dixie cup of soft-serve vanilla ice cream for \$4.90. The ramen itself boasts a rich-tasting broth, fat slices of flavorful pork, a hard-boiled egg, bean sprouts, and enough fresh noodles to fill a bathtub (or so it seems). Kids get a separate bowl (ours had a monkey on it), so parents can divide the ramen into smaller portions, thereby reducing any potential for mess.

Service is friendly and efficient, and portions are large.

Upside: Kids' menus, value-priced lunches, great introduction to Japanese noodles, highchairs

Downside: Cash only, no changing table in bathroom

Cheryl Sternman Rule is a San Jose parent and journalist who writes frequently about family and food.



Alex, 6, of San Jose savors the noodle-packed ramen at Maru Ichi in Mountain View.