



Sara Polon's Souper Girl restaurant started in a rented kitchen in Cleveland Park, before eventually settling in its Tacoma Park location.

GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

## Sara Polon puts the soup on

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Mothers and daughters may have complex ties to each other, but in the case of Sara Polon — also known as “Soupergirl” — she and her mom, Marilyn, have worked out those knotty intricacies — in a soup kitchen. Indeed, as Polon Junior asserts, her unique business might have never become such a soup sensation in the D.C. metro area without her mother.

She is a Jewish mother, like out of a movie, explains Polon, relating how her mom would say such things to her as “I don’t like your hair.” “But we get along, we are best friends, and we have a close relationship,” said Polon. “We bicker sometimes, but we laugh it off. That’s why we haven’t killed each other yet.”

And it’s good that they have resolved all their personal issues, because since 2008, they have worked feverishly to build up a soup business. “I was really searching for what to do with my life,” she said. “I had read ‘Omnivores Dilemma,’ and it really inspired me. I wanted to join a local food movement, and maybe make ice cream.”

That’s when one of Polon’s friends pointed out that her mom made really great soups. After further brainstorming, they came up with the idea. “Mom said, ‘Hey, you better start doing it.’ So she started researching recipes on the Internet and tweeting,” said Polon. “So she created a database of hundreds of soup recipes.”

When they experimented with recipes, they would invite neighbors to critique samples, asking them for some honest feedback. Finally, with a supply of polished recipes, the pair started the fledg-

### What is your comfort food?

Soup, I love a good bowl of butternut squash soup. It makes everything OK.

### What’s in your fridge?

It’s empty, because I am always here. No, but a lot of apples, kale, and salad fixings.

### What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

I would say the local food movement. I have learned to cook with so many different types of produce introduced to me by the local farmers. I never cooked with turnips before — I was scared of them. Before I launched this business, I never cooked with parsnips, and now they are one of my favorite win-

ter produce. They are sweet and delicious and produce a thick, creamy soup.

### Do you have a favorite cookbook?

Michael Pollan’s ‘Omnivore’s Dilemma’; it changes your approach to food. I love all Deborah Madison’s cookbooks. I love her and all of her cookbooks.

### What is your cooking philosophy, or tips to share with home cooks?

Don’t oversalt. Taste food before you serve it. I used to follow recipes, noting when it was done, and ready to serve. Now I taste food before I serve it, so as you are cooking, keep tasting to get the dish perfect. It is something I learned as I went along.

### IF YOU GO Souper Girl

» **Where:** 314 Carroll St. NW  
» **Info:** 202-609-7177  
» **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.  
Monday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday; 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday

ling business in a rented kitchen space in Cleveland Park. “We would cook there just the two of us,” said Polon.

As their line of soups have gained traction, Polon can look back over the years and report that the most popular flavor has been the West African Peanut Soup, made with homemade peanut butter, sweet potatoes and cumin. “We worried about peanut allergies,” she says,

“but it is by far and away our biggest seller. Soup is nostalgia; it is very warm and cozy, and then you add peanut butter, and it brings us back to childhood.”

Reflecting on the business, Polon acknowledges that the business took off rather quickly. “I have not slept in three and a half years,” she said. On the other hand, success has allowed them to move from their first location, then to a synagogue, and to their current retail location in Takoma Park.

That means that walk-in customers can pick up soups — and now salads and desserts — regularly. It also means that Polon now has a staff of 12 — her mom only cooks on site part-time, though she tests recipes at home — and Polon herself may actually have time to sleep. “We had no expectations that it would end up as it has,” she said.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

### Wines to cut your teeth on

For the past couple of weeks, I have been writing about how consumers who want to learn more about wine can do so by reading wine books, attending tastings and starting their own wine groups. But when it comes right down to it, the best thing to do is to simply taste more wine. The trick, however, is finding wines that will expand your horizons without shrinking your bank account.

When I was starting my own wine education, I cut my teeth on red Bordeaux wines because that was what my wine group could afford. But increasing demand in Asia combined with the climbing value of the euro has sent prices for grand cru wines through the roof. The idea of spending north of a \$100 for a learning experience is a bit outlandish. The good news is that with advances in winemaking techniques and choices from more countries, there are some very good wines that offer a lot of “palate education” for the money.

I have compiled a list of several wines that any wine novice or accomplished enthusiast can try for around \$12 a bottle. Retail prices are approximate.

One of the best ways to get a feel for a particular varietal is to try it “naked,” meaning without any oak treatment during the winemaking or aging process. The wines made by Ryan Flock for **Simply Naked** allow the expression of each type of grape to shine on its own. Flock makes a pinot grigio, chardonnay, merlot and cabernet sauvignon that are clean, fresh and straightforward, using premium fruit that has been sourced from some of the best regions in California.

The **Familia Zuccardi** line of wines hails from the Mendoza region of Argentina. They recently introduced a line of wines named Santa Julia [+] (\$10) that include torrontes, pinot grigio, viognier, malbec, and cabernet sauvignon. They use the [+] to symbolize that the grapes are sustainably farmed on their own estate. The 2010 torrontes and the 2010 malbec offer an interesting dichotomy from white to red. The torrontes offers up notes of white peaches, orange rind, pear and citrus flavors that are delicate, while the malbec is full-bodied, featuring ripe plums, blackberries and mocha flavors and a long, expressive finish. Both are good examples of their varietal’s characteristics.

Originally started in 1998, **Echelon Vineyards** was created to showcase fruit from the Central Coast region of California. Today, Echelon has expanded its roots beyond the Central Coast to showcase the characteristics unique to several of California’s diverse appellations by introducing its

“California Series” of wines. Echelon sources fruit for its new brand from a mixture of winegrowing regions. Winemaker Kurt Lorenzi combines the best of these regions to layer flavors and complexity. For example, grapes from the cool, coastal valleys are used in the chardonnay and pinot grigio (\$10) wines and have great concentration and structure, while grapes for the cabernet sauvignon and Red Blend (\$12) come from the warmer, interior valleys and add richness and suppleness.

One of the old wine tasting rules of thumb assumes Italian wines must be paired with food. **Castello di Gabbiano** has two wines that will let you be the judge of that. The 2010 Gabbiano Chianti DOCG (\$10) is a new-world Tuscan red that is aged in stainless steel tanks. It offers up pretty floral aromas and complementary flavors of red cherry and dark strawberry. While the bright acidity would love to play with a tomato-based pasta dish, the sweet tannins are content to remain a solo act.

