

# *The Adventures of* **Soupergirl**

*In a basement hidden deep below the nation's capital,  
Sara Polon is trying to save the world—  
one 40-quart stockpot at a time.*

Article and photographs by **Zach Patton**

**Ka-POW!**

Sara Polon is cooking in the Soupergirl secret lair, a kitchen she rents two days a week in the basement of a synagogue in Northwest D.C. The soup she's making this day is a black-eyed pea and mustard green soup, which she describes as a vegan version of Hoppin' John, the Southern bean-and-rice dish.

**Every superhero has a special power.** Some can fly. Others can shoot fire, or stop time, or leap tall buildings in a single bound. Sara Polon's superpower just might be her West African Safari Stew.

Polon has spent the past year and a half creating and running Soupergirl, a soup-delivery business in Washington, D.C. Having soup delivered to your door is certainly convenient, but Soupergirl's mission is bigger than that. Polon uses only seasonal ingredients, sourced exclusively from local farms. The way Polon sees it, it's a pretty simple idea. "A lot of people want to eat locally. They want to eat healthfully. But nobody has the time. And we're filling that void."

The soups—all of which are vegan—may be good for you, and they may rely on locally available produce. But don't expect thin, flavorless broths dotted with bits of limp vegetables. Soupergirl's concoctions are bold, hefty stews filled with the best ingredients that mid-Atlantic farmers have to offer. Giving her soups quirky names such as "The Hills Are Alive with the Sound of Carrot and Dill Soup" and "Roasted Sweet Potato and Apple Midlife Crisis Soup," Polon promises you'll forget that what you're eating is good for you. "I like to say that our soups are really healthy but we don't think you'll notice." The West African Safari Stew, a peanut soup sweetened with organic sweet potatoes, has become a customer fave, says Polon. "I just look for fresh, really flavorful ingredients."

### *The Making of a Hero*

Like all superheroes, Soupergirl has a great origin story. Two years ago, Polon was working a day job at a travel company in D.C. But she is not as mild-mannered as the typical comic book alter-ego: After college, she did a stint in New York as a stand-up comedian before moving back to her native Washington.

Then she read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan's paean to eating locally. The book changed her life. "I really can't recall a time I'd been so inspired by a book to really do something. I was astounded at the importance of the local food movement."

Catalyzed by the book, Polon decided to focus her life on local food. She considered farming or maybe opening an ice cream shop using fresh ingredients. But then it hit her. "A friend said, 'You know, you make really good soup.' The wheels started turning, and out popped Soupergirl."

Polon recruited her mother (alias Soupermom) to help her, and they spent the summer of 2008 trying out ingredients and developing recipes. Friends convened at Polon's apartment for weekly soup testings. At the same time, Polon began approaching local farms and organic co-ops about purchasing their produce. Then, that November, Polon and her mom officially launched the business, cooking their soups in a D.C. restaurant kitchen during off-hours.

### *A Champion of Local Food*

The way it works is simple. Each Monday, the Soupergirl website posts the flavors of soup that will be available the following week. There's always one light soup and one that's heartier entrée fare. (The soups cost about \$7 a serving.) Customers

place their orders, and their soup is delivered the next week. There's no commitment at all, although Polon recently began offering monthly "soupscriptions" for \$95. Customers can choose to have the soup delivered to their home or office. They also can opt to pick up their orders at one of several businesses Polon has partnered with, including a frozen yogurt shop in Dupont Circle, a chocolatier in Georgetown, and a yoga studio in Bethesda.

The business has grown steadily, and today Soupergirl has around 160 customers each week. Polon and her mother have ditched the restaurant kitchen and set up shop in an industrial kitchen in the basement of a synagogue in Northwest D.C. Polon delivers many of the orders herself, with coolers crammed into her Honda Fit hatchback. But she's also hired some people to help shuttle the soups.

### *Cooking in a Cape?*

Soupergirl's menu is always built around what's seasonally available. So although Polon has a good idea of what's in season, she never knows for sure what soups she'll be making until a couple weeks in advance. There have been hits and misses: A

**"People want to eat locally...  
But nobody has the time.  
We're filling that void."**

— Sara Polon (alias Soupergirl)



## Gingered Sweet Potato Soup

Yields 7 cups

- 2 teaspoons olive oil (as needed)
- 1 medium leek, white part only, cut in half lengthwise, rinsed well, thinly sliced
- 1 medium carrot, chopped
- 2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- One 1-inch piece of fresh ginger, peeled and finely chopped (set aside some grated ginger, too)
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- Salt to taste
- Cilantro for garnish

Heat oil in soup pot over medium-high heat. Add leeks and carrot and cook, stirring, until they begin to soften (2–3 minutes). Stir in sweet potatoes and chopped ginger. Add broth and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer until sweet potatoes are soft (about 30 minutes). Using an immersion blender, purée until smooth. If it is too thick, add water. Salt to taste.

Before serving, add some grated ginger for extra sharpness. Top with cilantro.

**Yowza!**

white bean, tomato, and kale soup was ditched after customers said it was too bland. And late winter, when the region's food cupboards are running low, can present a challenge, Polon says. "You're really left with just potatoes. It's like, 'Oh, here comes another potato soup.' But we make it work."

For the most part, though, Polon says her adventures in local food have been great. "Luckily, we live in an area where we have four full seasons. And with each season comes new produce." She'd like to move into her own kitchen space and maybe get some delivery trucks. And with orders booming, Polon says she'll need to add more pick-up sites.

Meanwhile, she'll continue cooking soups and scouring the area for the best local produce. Even after nearly two years of soup, Polon says she's not tired of it. "No, I love it! I eat soup seven days a week."

*Zach Patton is a writer in Washington, D.C. He and his boyfriend write about cooking on their blog, [thebittenword.com](http://thebittenword.com)*

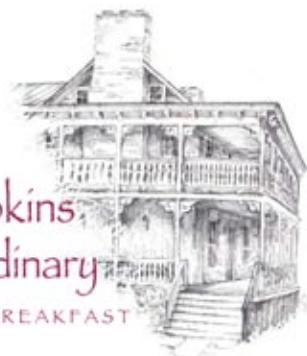
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