Chowda!

Soup’s on at Bay State Chowda Company in Lowell

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rigid winter weather and hot Chowder, soups, stews and bisques are always a perfect match.

What is more satisfying after battling below-freezing temperatures and wicked wind-chill factors than a steaming bowl of New England clam chowder? What warms the innards better after a day of brisk skiing on a Vermont or New Hampshire mountain than a delicious bowl of seafood chowder in a fine resort restaurant? Choices are, if you have savored a flavorful bowl of chowder, soup, or bisque at a New England ski resort or local restaurant, you may have sampled one of Bay State Chowda Company’s growing product lines.

Richard Lamattina, president and founder of Bay State Chowda, Inc., at 101 Phoenix Ave., Lowell, knew from the moment he opened the Lobst o Restaurant in North Andover in 1978 that his New England clam chowder recipe was unique.

“People told us it was outstanding and used to come into the Lobst o and buy by the quart,” Lamattina says proudly. “It made us ask what else we could do to add to the product and we were making at the restaurant to get it to more people.”

More enthusiastic praise greeted Lamattina’s recipe in 1985, when Bay State Chowda Company was first place at the first annual Boston Chowderfest, held on Boston Common. After a 10-year reprieve from the Boston Chowderfest scene, Lamattina reentered the competition in July 1993 and once again was voted number one.

“The contest is judged by the general public and there are around 10,000 people or more who attend the festival each year,” says Lamattina. “When you have that many people telling you that your product is good, it is just more foundation for saying, where can I go with this product?”

The answer for Lamattina was Fareull Hall Market Place, where he opened a food stand, using the name Kitchen of the Bay State in 1988. Most menu items represented foods cooked in the Bay State area. Chowders, chilies, and soups were prepared on the premises. Business boomed.

“We found out that the space was too small to make it, sell it, and serve it,” says Lamattina. “We opened up a satellite location to manufacture the product in Malden, Mass., also in 1988.

While in Malden, Lamattina and staff learned to prepare product in larger quantities, pack it fresh in cryo-Can bags, and ship it to Bay State Chowda’s two locations: North Andover and Fareull Hall. Through necessity, the company’s production methods became more sophisticated.

“The idea came to us that if we could do this successfully for ourselves, how many other restaurants out there did not want to go through the pains of making their own clam chowder, soups or chilies?” Lamattina says.

Bay State Chowda’s reputation spread quickly. The company expanded and in 1993 moved to a former fish processing facility in Lawrence, where Joseph Jolly, vice president of operations, and William Kelleher, vice president of sales and marketing, were added to the staff.

Kraft Foods, S.S. Pierce, and Hallamith-Swan began distributing Bay State Chowda’s food products to increasing numbers of restaurants.

Product volume surged. A new cafe opened in 1994 at the recently renovated Prudential Center in Boston. In spring 1995, a company store was established in North Andover. Through Bay State Chowda’s rapid growth spurt, the search began for a larger, USDA approved facility.

In fall 1993, Lamattina established his manufacturing headquarters in Lowell, and in March 1993, introduced his first retail item for supermarkets.

“It is a 16-ounce, frozen, microwaveable or boil-in-the bag, ready-to-heat and eat product,” Lamattina says. “We offer it in three varieties: seafood chowder, lobster bisque and New England Clam chowder. It can be found locally in the frozen seafood section of Stop & Shop, and it is available in supermarkets all over western Massachusetts.”

Bay State Chowda Company employee mixes a ready-to-heat and eat product. Shellfish, potatoes, and andouille sausage are added to the chowder base that is made with rich cream and butter. The mixture is then simmered on the stove before being added to water (enough to cover the seafood). When ready to serve, add milk and heated cream and heat through, but do not boil. Add”

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“Vivid,satisfying, New York, Colorado and Kansas,” he adds with a grin.

Lamattina’s chowder recipe is a well-guarded secret. However, he says the key to making superb clam chowder is selecting superior ingredients: the finest cream, high quality potatoes, and of course, fresh, sweet clams.

“Most people don’t want to attempt making New England clam chowder,” chuckles Lamattina. “They leave it up to the chefs and restaurateurs like us.”

For the more adventurous home chefs, the chowder recipe below (although it is not the award-winning Bay State Chowda recipe and does not require cream), will warm chilly souls on these final frosty evenings of winter.

Traditional New England Clam Chowder

1 1/2 qts. chopped clams

1/2 lb. butter or margarine
3 medium onions, chopped
3 large potatoes, diced
2 tablespoons flour
1 quart milk
1 pint evaporated milk
2 cups clam juice
1/2 teaspoon salt, fresh ground pepper to taste.

Celery salt to taste while heating

Melt butter in chowder pot, add chopped onions and saute till translucent on low heat. Add potatoes, cover with water (enough to cover potatoes). Simmer until potatoes are done. Add clams and two cups of clam juice. Dissolve flour in a little milk and add to

Bay State Chowda Company employee mixes a batch of its prize-winning product.