

Going cocoa

Laura Goodman finds four meltingly good recipes for hot chocolate – and the best places to enjoy them

We humans have been drinking chocolate for longer than we've been eating it. The Aztecs kicked things off with a chocolatey brew they believed had divine properties, but it was, by all accounts, a murky paste of bitter beans. These days, hot chocolate is smoother, creamier, lovelier, but still spiked with magic. Every chilly city on this planet has its own way of transforming chocolate into a liquid that's obscene enough to turn your day around. Here I've chosen four of my favourite cocoa-loving locations.

For these recipes, use the best chocolate you can get. Look out for Valrhona or Willie's Cacao in supermarkets, or treat yourself online to bars by Original Beans or Domori from Cocoa Runners (cocoarunners.com) or Chocolate Trading Co (chocolatetradingco.com). For dark chocolate, go for a bar with at least 70% cocoa solids.

NEW YORK Charred-marshmallow hot chocolate

Trust New York to take things up a notch. At the dark and sassy NoMad Bar (thenomadhotel.com), Leo Robitschek knocks up cocktails with hot chocolate as their base. The ciampino, for example, contains Fernet-Branca, green chartreuse, angostura cream and hot chocolate.

During the day, the Big Apple's chocolate-based offerings are also wild. At the trailblazing Baked in Red Hook, Brooklyn (bakednyc.com), and its new offshoot in Tribeca, the hot chocolate comes salted, with flavoured home-made marshmallows bobbing on top.

At the minimalist end of the spectrum, the Mast Brothers chocolate factory, in Brooklyn (mastbrothers.com), revisits the Aztecs' elixir — the baristas there take good cocoa beans from around the world and roast and brew them like coffee.

Meanwhile, at Milk Bar (milkbarstore.com), the sister bakery of the Momofuku restaurant group, the sugar genius Christina Tosi develops birthday cake shakes and cornflake, marshmallow and chocolate chip cookies. Her charred-marshmallow hot chocolate is as bonkers as it sounds.

Serves 4

10g marshmallows, plus more to garnish
70ml double cream
36g sugar
130ml glucose syrup (available in supermarket baking aisles)
1 tbsp cocoa powder
45g dark chocolate, broken into chunks
A pinch of salt
500ml whole milk

Char the marshmallows by placing them on a metal skewer and toasting them over an open gas flame on your hob (or grill them carefully for a few minutes, turning occasionally). Put to one side.

Make a fudge sauce by placing the cream, sugar and syrup in a saucepan and bring to the boil, stirring occasionally. Add the cocoa powder, dark chocolate, salt and 10g of the toasted marshmallows, then stir again until the chocolate and marshmallows have completely melted.

Add the milk to the pan and keep stirring so the fudge sauce doesn't burn on the bottom. Pour into cups and garnish with the charred marshmallows.

PARIS Hot chocolate with almond milk

The French know how to live, and that's why they have no qualms about drinking chocolate for breakfast. Get the job done at Café Charlot (cafecharlotparis.com), a pavement cafe in the Marais, with rattan chairs, red parasols and wobbly round tables. The set breakfast is a gratifying Parisian combo involving a boiled egg, a milky hot chocolate and a basketful of pastries.

Later, you can get serious at the fancy chocolaterie Jacques Genin (jacquesgenin.fr). Here, you'll pour dark, soupy hot chocolate out of your personal teapot into your cup, before adding jewel-like sugar cubes to taste.

Clotilde Dusoulier is a Parisian writer who blogs at chocolateandzucchini.com. Her hot chocolate is thick and bittersweet,

as her city dictates, but she likes the nutty flavour of almond milk, especially at breakfast time. You could use regular milk instead, and feel free to add sugar, too.

Serves 4
125g dark chocolate, chopped
600ml almond milk
2 tbsp unsweetened cocoa powder

Melt the chocolate in a heatproof bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water. Set aside. Empty the pan, pour in the almond milk and bring to a simmer over a medium heat. Whisk in the cocoa powder and bring it back to a simmer. Pour a third of the almond milk into the melted chocolate, whisking well to get a smooth and shiny consistency. Whisk in the rest, then serve.

VIENNA Hot chocolate spiked with rum

This city's version of hot chocolate is proof that simple is usually best. Right on the Danube, Motto am Fluss (motto.at) is an alluring cafe where they bring you a cup of hot milk and a bar of good chocolate to melt and mix yourself. However, Demel (demel.at), a pastry and chocolate shop that still styles itself "purveyor to the imperial and royal court", is the real deal. Its interior — all polished wood, elegant stucco and golden light — is almost designed with chocolate drinking in mind. The hot chocolate is a dream, and the impeccable sachertorte (the famous Austrian chocolate cake) is a bonus. Iris Mitterbacher, the Ritz-Carlton Vienna's chocolate expert, uses hot

water in her recipe to get the full flavour of the chocolate, as well as rum. For authenticity, you could try the strong, spiced Austrian Stroh rum, though Mitterbacher likes Pyrat, too.

Serves 1

50g dark or white chocolate, broken into squares
250ml hot water, or milk if you prefer
¼ tsp sunflower oil
10ml vanilla syrup
20ml rum

Place the chocolate in a heatproof bowl and pour over the hot water, or milk if using. Set aside for a few minutes to let the chocolate melt, then add the oil — this will keep the hot chocolate liquid and give it a glossy finish. Stir until smooth. Add the vanilla and rum, stir well and serve.

TURIN Creamy espresso hot chocolate

Turin, in northern Italy, is full of gorgeous, ornate old chocolate houses. It's close to birthplace of Nutella and the Ferrero factory. And because it's surrounded by the best hazelnut trees in the world, its crown jewel is the giandujotto, a little boat-shaped chocolate filled with a velvety mix of chocolate and hazelnut paste (gianduja), wrapped to look like a gold ingot. Head to Stratta (www.stratta1836.it) for pralines, gianduja and truffles, served with a classic, thick hot chocolate.

Hot chocolate, or, more specifically, bicerin, a layered drink of espresso, hot chocolate and cream, is Turin's other thing. Caffè al Bicerin (bicerin.it) is a beautiful, wood-panelled dining room on a cobbled street that has been serving its namesake drink (and guarding the recipe) for more than 250 years. Elizabeth Minchilli blogs about eating all over Italy

at elizabethminchilliinrome.com. This is her version of bicerin.

Serves 4

400ml double cream
240g dark chocolate, grated
240ml hot, strong espresso, made however you like

Heat 240ml of the double cream in a saucepan, taking care not to let it overheat. Tip the grated chocolate into the pan and stir slowly until smooth. Lightly whip the rest of the double cream until it barely begins to thicken.

Meanwhile, heat a glass by pouring hot water into it. Leave it to stand for a few minutes, then tip out the water.

To serve, pour the espresso into the glass first, followed by the hot chocolate. Top with the whipped cream. ■