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Hot chocolate with caramel whipped cream at The Ritz-Carlton, Boston. Photo by The Ritz-Carlton, Boston.

"Drinking chocolate is one of the oldest chocolate categories, and yet is only now experiencing a resurgence of interest," according to the International Chocolate Salon, sponsor of the annual juried Artisan Chocolate Awards. Paul Dincer, founder of boundary-pushing Koko Monk Chocolates in Vancouver, Canada, agrees: "Over the past decade the landscape of hot chocolate preferences has undergone a notable transformation. Enthusiasts", he says, "now seek unique flavor profiles, experiment with different chocolate types, and move away from traditional confectionery perceptions."

From the curry and coconut liqueur that infuse Dincer's Brunette Bangle, to the Golden Dark and Egnog drinking chocolate that won top honors for Delysia Chocolatier of Austin, Texas at the Salon, pastry chefs and chocolatiers are finding myriad options for whipping up enticing chocolate creations in a cup. Like chocolatier A. L. Burdick, they are sourcing single origin cacao from Bolivia to Venezuela, and adding imaginative toppings like Dominique Ansel's blossoming whipped cream. When describing their drinks, some tend to blur the distinction between hot cocoa, customarily made with cocoa powder, and hot chocolate, based on shaved, grated or melted chocolate, or a deeper, richer version called drinking or sipping chocolate. The terms are often used interchangeably.

At the month-long Hot Chocolate Festival in Vancouver last year, officials counted 143 flavors served at 95 locations. Dincer, who has designed over a hundred adventurous drinks since opening his first chocolate shop in 2013, offered four selections; among them passion fruit and peppercorn, and chili white chocolate, based on the use of heirloom cacao beans and pure ingredients, accompanied by thoughtful comments reflecting his design philosophy and background in both pastry and academia. To Dincer's surprise, the favorite was a mystery flavor that, he reflects "created a solid sense of community among strangers who were sharing their experiences and guesses." The shocking revelation? Organic chicken broth, white chocolate, and a dash of organic collagens topped with slivered almonds and roasted walnut meal.



Dominique Ansel's blossoming hot chocolate.

As Dincer was developing his avant-garde style, celebrated French chocolatier Jean-Paul Hevin was shocking Parisians, accustomed to classic chocolat chaud, with imaginative, bold flavors, including banana, pistachio, carrot, and a much buzzed about oyster creme, with salt foam and jelly balls. Hevin's current favorites include raspberry and a mango pulp whipped cream topping that, he suggests, should not be mixed into the beverage so the favors remain separate.

For Dincer, Hevin, and other aficionados, the preparation of the perfect hot chocolate begins with the choice of cacao. L. A. Burdick, who has cafes and shops from the East coast to Chicago, offers a rotating selection of seven single source cacao. This year Valrhona is promoting Single Origin Nyangbo 68% ground dark chocolate from Ghana, citing "a subtle acidity which allows round chocolate notes to develop, followed by a soft and sweet spiciness ... enhanced by a delicate bitter presence." Pastry chef Derek Poirer, at L'Ecole Valrhona uses Nyangbo for Spicy Thai Peanut hot chocolate combining a spicy syrup made with dried red chilies, peanut butter, coconut cream, milk and cream. Guillaume Roesz's Pumpkin Spice blends Nyangbo with cinnamon, cloves, ground pepper, ginger, nutmeg and pumpkin puree, topped with a pumpkin-seed foam.



Pastry Chef Christopher Goluszka, The Ritz-Carlton, Boston.

Christopher Goluszka, pastry chef at the Ritz Carlton in Boston's theater district, has a different approach. He prefers a blend of milk and dark cacao for the hot chocolate served tableside at the hotel's lively Avery Bar: Maracaibo creole 49% grand cru de terroir milk couverture for its creaminess and delicate cream caramel notes; and Maracaibo clasificado 65% grand cru de terroir dark couverture, with coffee, plum, orange blossom, and cinnamon aromas. Toppings include house-made vanilla marshmallows and caramel whipped cream. "I wanted to keep things pretty simple and approachable for our guests, since the main emphasis is on the hot chocolate," Goluszka explains. "[I wanted] to highlight the different flavor notes in the chocolate instead of competing with them – and personally I stuck to the toppings I liked to eat with hot cocoa as a kid." But he adds that any spirit or cordial can be added to the beverage.

The artisanal Kakawa Chocolate Company uses a different cacao profile: drinking-chocolate elixirs based on recipes from historical sources. At shops in Santa Fe, NM, and Salem, MA, Kakawa concocts elixirs ranging from pre-Columbian to colonial American, and from French lavender to modern Mexican. The unsweetened Aztec Warrior is made with 100% chocolate, herbs, flowers, nuts, spices, Pasilla de Oaxaca Chili, and Madagascar vanilla; Salem Spice recalls the black pepper trade in colonial America, pairing 33% white chocolate with cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, black pepper and vanilla.



Frozen Hot Chocolate, Serendipity 3.

As well as opting for a specific type of cacao, many chefs focus on a distinctive flavor reflecting their cuisine. Tahini adds a Middle Eastern touch at Anoush'ella in Boston and Sofra in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a recipe included in their cookbook, Soframiz. Bicerin, a layered drink of espresso, chocolate, and whipped cream, a specialty of Turin, Italy, is a natural at Eataly and other Italian cafes. For their Tokyo café, San Francisco-based Dandelion created Hojicha Hot Chocolate, blending what it describes as, "delicately roasted Japanese green tea with our classically fudgy 70% Camino Verde, Ecuador chocolate and a hint of golden brown sugar."

Currently popular dessert flavors also star in the hot chocolate universe. At Manhattan's legendary Serendipity 3, a mecca for New Yorkers, tourists, and celebrities since 1954, chef/creative director Joe Calderone, keeps up with the latest trends, offering 14 versions of their signature Frrrozen Hot Chocolate including, Salted Caramel, Peanut Butter, Birthday Cake, and S'mores. Calderone, who has been with the company for 37 years, suggests that their white chocolate base "can be flavored with fruit, cake batter, or cereals to make fun new flavor profiles." He makes a vegan version with coconut milk, and coconut whipped cream.



Koko Monk hot chocolate flight from scratch.

Tipsy hot chocolates also abound. In Washington, D.C., the three Azzouz brothers who opened Urban Roast café and cocktail bar in 2020 take advantage of a dozen Bailey's flavors like Salted Caramel and S'mores. At the Frosty Barrel in Newcastle, Washington, Spiked Butterscotch Hot Chocolate, pairs Bailey's Irish Cream, Butterscotch Schnapps and cinnamon with white chocolate; Tiramisu is made with dark chocolate Creme de Cacao, Espresso Liqueur, chocolate Mascarpone whip, and cinnamon. The George, a convivial pub in Vail, Colorado, accents fruit in Nuts & Berries with Frangelico and Black Raspberry liqueur, and Chocolate Orange with Stoll Orange and Irish Cream.

Two posh ski resorts in Vail are prime destinations for fanciful hot chocolate. At The Sebastian, a gold dusted sphere of Valrhona milk chocolate is immersed in a cup of dark hot cocoa spiced with cinnamon, star anise, vanilla and cloves. The hot cocoa melts the sphere revealing marshmallows and chocolate crunch pearls.



Remedy Bar's Haut Chocolat at The Four Seasons, Vail. Photo by Jenna Houstley

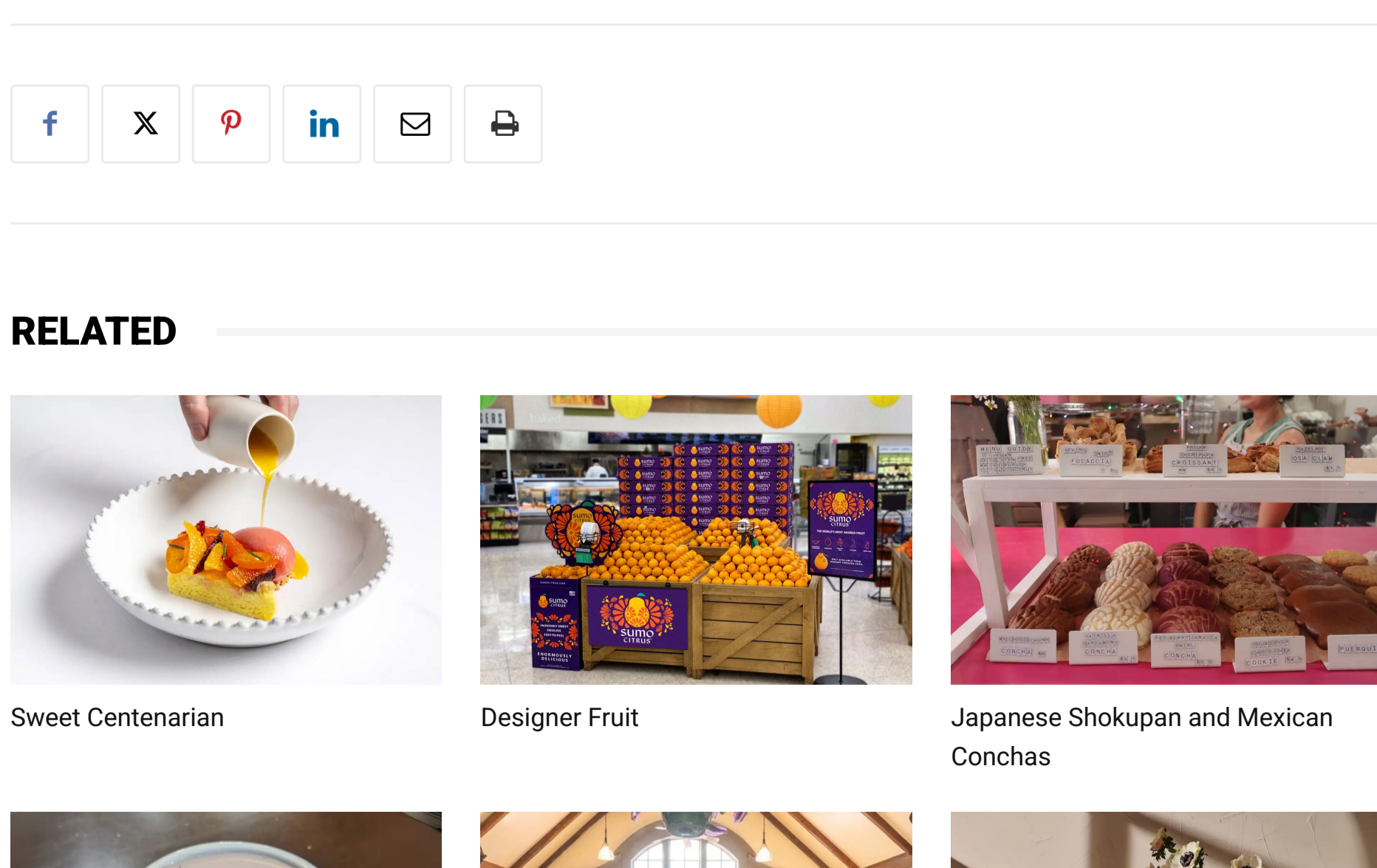
The Remedy Bar at the Four Seasons Vail has a different flourish for its Haut Chocolat, a delicate chocolate lattice. Each morning, a chef crafts the lattice, piping melted Valrhona chocolate into a circular pattern on parchment paper. The lattice is placed atop a porcelain cup along with an oversize marshmallow and chocolate shavings. When hot chocolate, a blend of Valrhona 35% milk chocolate, 70% dark chocolate, and steamed milk, is poured from a traditional French chocolate pot into the cup, the topping slowly melts.

James Beard once bemoaned that hot chocolate "has become something that is tipped out of a little paper bag into a cup, dissolved in hot water and served with artificial whipped cream." Now, with elegant apres-ski presentations, high-desert historical elixirs, and cutting edge creations, Beard would be delighted with what he described as "the glories of a truly well-made cup of hot chocolate."

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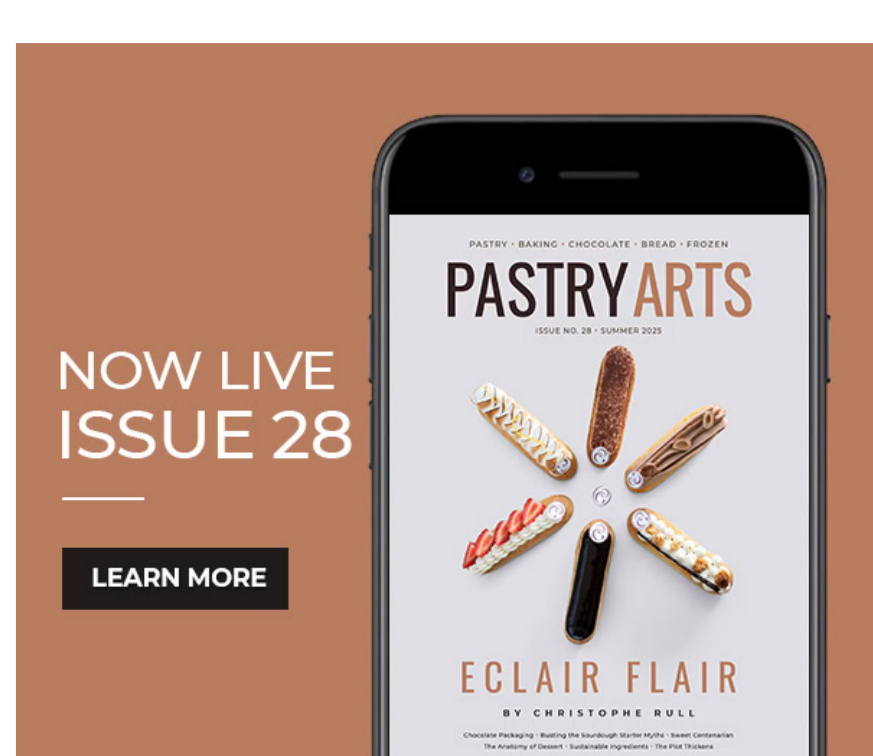


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