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Monday, March 12, 2007

Cacao Culture

Dateline: Across the U.S.

Hot chocolate used to be considered a kiddy drink or a sweet alternative to coffee or tea, but deluxe drinking chocolates from European-inspired chocolatiers such as Jacques Torres and Marie Belle have turned it into an adult indulgence. Today chocolate lounges and cafés are popping up everywhere, just as premium coffeehouses did in the late '80s and early '90s. And for chocolate connoisseurs — who know their chocolate like Miles in *Sideways* knows his wine — this new batch of cocoa-centric cafés is thrilling.

Chocolate lounges are leisurely spots where you can linger over a cup and lose yourself in a chocolate reverie, not just grab it and go

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— and the beverages are the main act, not just an afterthought. The concept of a chocolate lounge or café actually dates back to the chocolate houses of 17th- and 18th-century Europe, when, like now, chocolate was all the rage.

What sets these new premium hot chocolates served at these spots apart from the kid's stuff? It's a higher proportion of chocolate to dairy, according to Aubrey Lindley, co-owner of **Cacao** in Portland, Oregon. Cacao, which opened just six months ago, features both hot chocolate and drinking chocolate. "Hot chocolate is similar to what people are accustomed to and contains some cocoa powder," says Lindley. "Our drinking chocolate is half dairy and half chocolate and is served in a much smaller cup." The resulting beverage is more intense. As for the effect of the beverage on customers? "I wish everybody would drink it," says Lindley. "The minute people do, their whole body changes and you can just see them relax." (414 SW 13th Ave., Portland, OR; 503-241-0656; www.cacaodrinkchocolate.com)

Naked Chocolate Café in Philadelphia, which also opened last year, has seen tremendous hot chocolate beverage consumption, now accounting for about 35 percent of its business. A sweet café, it also offers chocolate desserts, coffee, and teas, including chocolate-flavored teas. While the classic variety of hot chocolate made with a combination of ground chocolate and cocoa is the most popular, owner Tom Block also offers two "sipping chocolates," one milk chocolate and the other bittersweet, which are made from a single variety of pure melted chocolate and milk. The varieties used in the sipping chocolates are a closely held secret, but the milk version is often made from a 41-percent-cacao chocolate from Venezuela, while the bittersweet uses a single-source chocolate that can range from 65- to 75-percent cacao. Served in a small cup at a slightly cooler temperature, it is more dessert than beverage. (1317 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA; 215-735-7310; www.nakedchocolatecafe.com)

At **CocoaBella** in San Francisco, a stop by the bar in the back of the shop reveals eight different flavors of what's billed as "European style" hot chocolate — an intense brew that has its roots in France, Spain, and Italy. Various flavors, including hazelnut, raspberry, and mint, can be ordered in a white, milk, dark, or extra-dark version. On a recent evening chocolatier Christopher Elbow stopped by to mix up hot drinking chocolate with fresh juices such as passion fruit and a blend of grapefruit, tangerine, and orange. The citrus version in particular was a revelation, offering the tangy freshness of juice in a hot beverage — an unusual and delicious combo. (2102 Union St., San Francisco, CA; 415-931-6213; www.cocoabella.com)

The trend seems poised to go mainstream as chains get in on the act. The **South Bend Chocolate Company** (www.sbchocolate.com) has 19 branches in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. **Ethel's Chocolate Lounge** (www.ethelchocolate.com), owned by Mars, has ten locations in Chicago and another four in and around Las Vegas. **Moonstruck Chocolate** (www.moonstruckchocolate.com) has nine café locations in Oregon, California, and Chicago and the company plans to open more. Chocoholics couldn't be happier.

— Amy Sherman

More from Epicurious: Read about and get a recipe from the book [Hot Chocolate: 50 Deliciously Decadent Homemade Chocolate Treats](#), plus create your own chocolate café experience at home with one of our 40-plus [hot chocolate recipes](#).

*Want to read more pieces by Sherman? Check out her blog, [Cooking with Amy](#) (cookingwithamy.blogspot.com).
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Photograph of plate by Davies + Starr, courtesy of www.mossoonline.com