

CHOCOLATE CHOICES

By Daniel Neman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The best part about winter is hot chocolate. I think we can all agree on that.

Think of it: You're out in the snow. Your feet are wet. Your toes ache. Your nose is running. You can't feel your fingers. You have been shivering so long you don't remember what it is like to not shiver.

And then you come into a house and someone hands you a steaming cup of hot chocolate. And suddenly you are suffused with happiness and warmth.

It doesn't even have to be good hot chocolate. You have much the same reaction even if the hot chocolate came in powdered form out of one of those paper envelopes.

So think of how much better it would be to have hot chocolate that is actually homemade. And not only homemade, but the best, silkiest, most luxurious hot chocolate anyone has ever made anywhere in the world. Ever.

I happen to have the recipe for the best ever hot chocolate. Not only that, I happen to have the two recipes for the two best ever hot chocolates. These are hot chocolates that could possibly change your life.

And what if that cold temperature should suddenly become warm? I turned one of those hot chocolates into ice cream, too.

The hot chocolate ice cream is probably the chocolatiest ice cream you've ever had.

I started with a mug of mind-blowingly good Parisian Hot Chocolate. The French are widely thought to have the best food in the world, so it makes sense that they would also make the best hot chocolate.

Their secret is a step I never would have even considered: They caramelize the sugar. That is, they slowly melt the sugar until it turns a rich amber in color and turning it into caramel. They add the milk to that — milk, note, not cream — which makes a hot caramel milk.

Finally, they stir in heaps of finely chopped bittersweet chocolate, the finest quality they can find and afford.

The taste, and especially the texture, is that of a smooth, velvety chocolate. The bittersweet chocolate has just enough edge to it to keep it from becoming cloying, and this balance is further heightened by serving the drink with chantilly whipped cream, sweetened whipped cream with more than a hint of vanilla.

I made my own chantilly whipped cream, which goes with this chocolate like Laurel goes with Hardy. I did it right, too, using the seeds from half of a vanilla bean. But vanilla beans are expensive, especially now, because Madagascar is still trying to recover from a couple of catastrophic storms that devastated the crop.

If you want to use vanilla extract instead of the vanilla bean, I won't complain. You could even use whipped cream that comes out of a can, though it would lack that soothing vanilla presence.

Just don't serve Parisian Hot Chocolate with marshmallows. It would ruin the effect; this hot chocolate needs whipped cream like Abbott needs Costello.

I used the Parisian Hot Chocolate recipe to make the ice cream, and it wasn't an immediate success. Because the recipe is made with milk instead of cream, the texture was granular and stiff. And although the bittersweet chocolate is exactly the correct ingredient to use in hot chocolate, it is a touch too bitter for ice cream.

Also, it needs salt. I don't know why, but it needs salt.

So I made batch after batch after batch (OK, three batches) of ice cream, tweaking it each time. What I ended up with is a base made with both whole milk and heavy



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Parisian hot chocolate topped with Chantilly cream.

cream, with piles of semisweet chocolate instead of bittersweet. And salt, of course. I don't know why.

Those changes made it a peerless chocolate ice cream that tastes just like hot chocolate, only colder.

The other hot chocolate I made comes from Claridge's, the ultra-luxe hotel in London. Their method of making hot chocolate is, naturally, brilliant.

First, they make ganache — they melt chocolate (only the best, of course) and stir in hot cream until it is thoroughly blended and sumptuous. Then, they heat a pot of milk.

The hot chocolate is made by mixing the ganache and the steaming milk. How simple is that? How delicious?

The genius of this method is that each individual can mix his own ratio of ganache to milk. That way, you can make it as rich and decadent as you want.

I made mine with almost as much ganache as milk. It was divine. Maybe it wasn't so great for the arteries, but it was divine.

PARISIAN HOT CHOCOLATE

Yield: 3 servings

2 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 1/2 cups milk, any kind
4 ounces best-quality bittersweet chocolate (60% to 70% cacao), finely chopped
Chantilly whipped cream, for serving

1. In a small saucepan, heat the sugar over medium heat until it melts and turns amber, without stirring; simply tilt the pan from time to time to encourage even caramelization. This should take a few minutes. Remove from the heat to cool for 1 minute.

2. Carefully pour in the milk, return to medium heat and bring to a simmer, stirring well to dissolve (it may take the crystallized sugar a minute or two to dissolve). Reduce the heat to medium low. Whisk in the chocolate and stir until melted. Bring to a low simmer and cook, stirring continually without allowing the mixture to boil, until the hot chocolate is thickened, 5 to 8 minutes longer (You can make this in advance; cool and gently reheat before serving).

3. Pour into cups and let rest 5 minutes. Serve with Chantilly whipped cream, either in a bowl on the side or piped onto the surface of the hot chocolate at the last minute using a piping bag fitted with a star tip.

CHANTILLY WHIPPED CREAM

Yield: 3 servings (1 1/2 cups)

2/3 cup whipping cream, chilled
2 tablespoons powdered sugar
1/2 vanilla bean or 1 tablespoon vanilla extract

1. If possible, chill a medium bowl and the whisk attachment of an electric mixer (or a large bowl and a large whisk) in the refrigerator 2 hours before you begin.

2. In the chilled bowl, combine the whipping cream and powdered sugar. Slice the half vanilla bean lengthwise and scrape the seeds into the bowl, or add the vanilla extract.

3. If using an electric mixer, start mixing the cream on medium-low speed, then increase the speed slightly every 30 seconds or so to reach medium-high speed. If using a whisk, whisk the mixture vigorously. The cream is ready when the whisk leaves clear traces and the cream forms beautiful, firm peaks when you lift up the whisk, 4 to 5 minutes total.

4. Transfer to a container with a tight-fitting lid or a piping bag fitted with a plain or star tip, and chill for 2 hours or overnight before using.

Adapted from "Tasting Paris" by Clotilde Dusoulier

HOT CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM

Yield: 4 servings (1 quart)

1/2 cup granulated sugar, divided
2 cups whole milk
1 cup whipping cream
8 ounces semisweet chocolate, finely chopped
1/4 teaspoon salt

1. In a medium saucepan, heat 1/4 cup of the sugar over medium heat until it melts and turns amber, without stirring; simply tilt the pan from time to time to encourage even caramelization. This should take a few minutes. Remove from the heat to cool for 1 minute.

2. Carefully stir in the milk and cream, return to medium heat and bring to a simmer, stirring well to dissolve (it may take a minute or two for the crystallized sugar to dissolve). Reduce the heat to medium low. Whisk in the chocolate, the remaining 1/4 cup sugar and the salt, and stir until the chocolate has melted. Bring to a low simmer and cook, stirring continually without allowing the mixture to boil, until the hot chocolate is thickened, 5 to 8 minutes.

3. Allow to cool to room temperature. You can speed up this process by filling a large bowl halfway with ice and water, pouring the hot chocolate into a medium bowl and placing that bowl in the larger bowl; stirring the chocolate will further quicken the cooling process.

4. Freeze according to ice cream manufacturer's instructions.

Recipe by Daniel Neman, inspired by "Tasting Paris" by Clotilde Dusoulier

CLARIDGE'S RICH HOT CHOCOLATE

Yield: 4 servings

7 ounces best-quality dark chocolate (70% cocoa solids), broken into pieces
10 ounces whipping cream
4 cups (1 quart) hot milk
Marshmallows

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Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Homemade Hot Chocolate Ice Cream, served with pirouette cookies.



NUTRITION: IT'S ALL GOOD
ANN BLOOM

Don't give up on good nutrition

To say 2020 was an exceptional year, and generally not in a good way, would be an overstatement of the obvious. With everything that is going on around us, and in the world, some may think this is a good time to let something as simple as nutrition go by the wayside. After all, who wants to think about fruits and vegetables when you're not even sure you can get fruits and vegetables to feed your family, let alone anything else? However, don't give into the temptation to let your health goals slide.

Some people think eating a healthy diet of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy products is complicated and expensive. It is neither. Menu planning, buying items on sale, making good use of what you already have in your pantry, and buying in season as much as possible are key things to have in your tool chest of options for continuing to eat a healthy diet. And remember, fruits and vegetables do not have to always be fresh for you to benefit from their nutritional value. Fruits and vegetables in all forms, canned, frozen, dried or as 100% juice, all count.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS
WENDY SCHMIDT

Eating thistles? Absolutely

Usually thistles are thought of as unwelcome invaders of our gardens and pastures. There are a couple different kinds of thistles we welcome, as we think of them as a source of food. Artichokes and cardoons are appreciated in many ethnically different cuisines.

Another, the milk thistle, is important in herbal medicine.

Artichokes and cardoons are native to the Mediterranean area. North of zone 7 they do not reliably overwinter in the gardens of Union or Baker counties.

They should be started by seed indoors in pots two to three months before the last frost date in spring. Move the pots outdoors when the weather warms up and freezes overnight only occasionally. Protect if temperatures fall below 29 degrees Fahrenheit.

Two to four weeks of cool temperature exposure "vernalizes" young seedlings. This sets the plants up to bloom later when the plants have gained some size.

The flower buds of artichokes are the edible part of the plant. You can't eat the flower buds of the cardoon, but this allows you to enjoy their large, showy flowers.

The edible part of the cardoon are the stems and roots. If harvested early enough to be tender, cardoon stems and roots may be eaten raw.

Cooked (boiled or steamed) artichokes and cardoon are enjoyed by people in many parts of the world.

Green Globe artichokes are the most common variety, but "violet de provence" is a popular French variety. "Purple of Romagna" is an Italian artichoke cultivar.

Cardoon varieties are "Gobbo di Nizia" and "Rouge D'Aiger." Literature on cardoons state and show that their flowers are purple, but the one in my mom's garden had yellow blooms.

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