

Cuckoo for Cocoa

It's cold, it's rainy, so give me a cuppa
BY VANESSA SALVIA



VERO'S COCOA USES
MY CHAI SYRUP
PHOTO ATHENA DELENE

A few years ago some friends and I were driving around on a cold wintry day and stopped by a popular place for hot cocoa, just for fun. The waiter, with great aplomb, opened a pack of Swiss Miss into a paper cup! We were astonished, and not just because of the flair with which he tore the paper packet, but because my friend spoke at length on the drive about how great the cocoa at this particular place was. How could she have been so wrong?

There are a few silver linings to winter around here: a bone-warming fire, bowls of soup topped with melted cheese and mugs of rich hot chocolate. A great cup of hot chocolate is the best kind of winter pick-me-up. At its worst, a cup of hot chocolate is still a pretty great thing when you're cold and worn out. To find the best, I investigated several Eugene cafés and evaluated their hot cocoa.

One challenge was establishing criteria for my hot chocolate pursuit. First of all, there is a difference between hot cocoa (traditionally powdered) and hot chocolate (traditionally melted bar chocolate), although not all establishments adhered to this nomenclature. Some are made with syrup (Metropol uses Torani brand syrup, Vero uses My Chai syrup), some with powder (Perugino uses Euphoria cocoa powder, Prince Pückler's uses Stephen's). Some are powder mixed with water (Espresso Roma) and some with milk (Vero and Metropol), and some places give you a choice (Prince Pückler's). Some are made only of steamed chocolate milk, such as Dutch Bros., which uses a blend of Umpqua chocolate milk made especially for them. Some are made with decaf

espresso (Wandering Goat).

To-go cups lack the presentation of the café cup and saucer. (But, really, when you need hot cocoa, how much does presentation matter? My final evaluation was ... not so much.). Some establishments offered regular hot chocolate, Mexican hot chocolate (with sugar and cinnamon) and even white hot chocolate, so your chocolate mood can also be a factor. Then there are the practical considerations such as size and price. I got smalls at each place, which varied from 8 ounces to 12 ounces, for anywhere from \$1.95 to \$2.75.

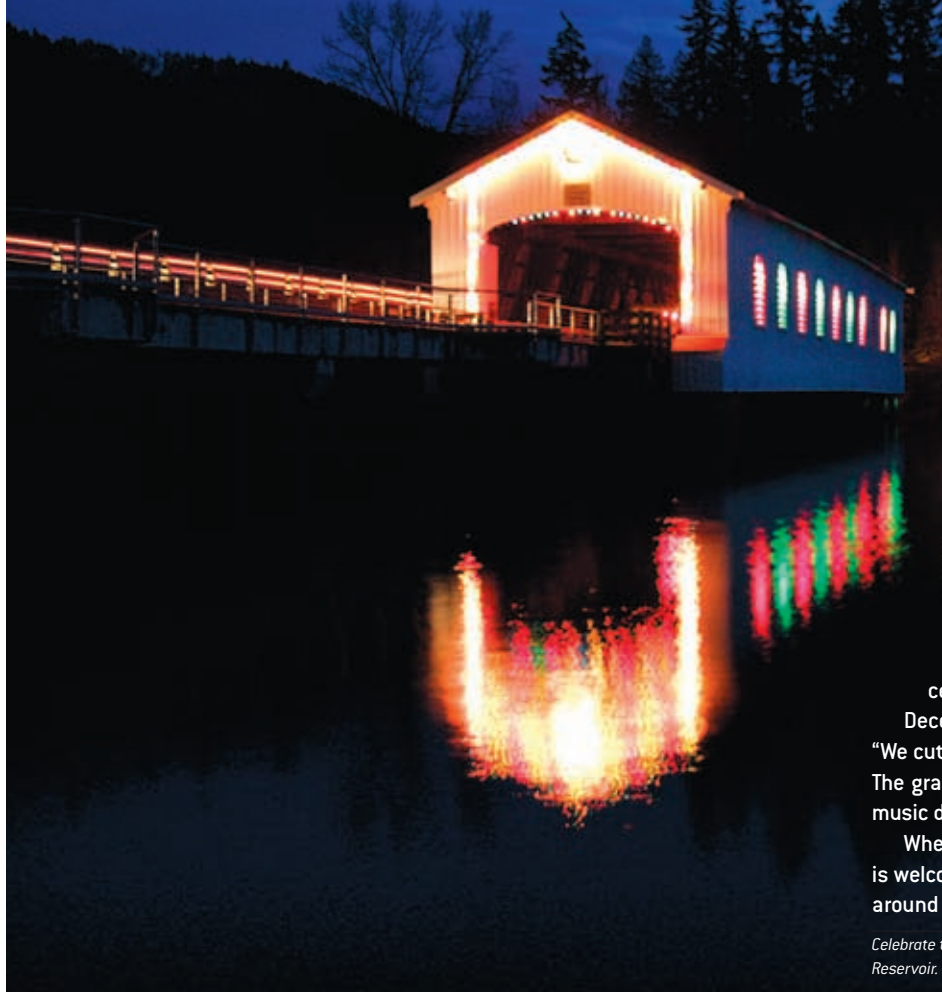
Sweet Life, Marché Museum Café and Full City make their own ganache, which is similar to fudge, and add that to steamed milk to make hot chocolate. Sweet Life uses Guittard chocolate powder with cinnamon for its Mexican hot chocolate, and uses a liquid for its white hot chocolate.

All tasted good, but the ganache version was the richest, and certainly the most "chocolatey." These had a good balance of creaminess and bitterness without that slightly scorched taste that I found in some of the steamed milk versions. Marché wins for the lagniappe; whereas all establishments offered whipped cream on top, only Marché provided house-made marshmallows.

While I found a great variety of hot chocolate in Eugene, I did not find a way to determine an absolute best. Turns out, there are as many ways to make hot cocoa as there are styles of Birkenstocks, and all of them are good in a pinch. Luckily, that Swiss Miss affair was just a spot of bad luck. ■

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Lowell

*Former Lowell mayor keeps covered
bridge cheery for the holidays*
BY RACHAEL CARNES



Warren Weathers served as Lowell's mayor for nearly 20 years, and though he's hung up his municipal duties, he hasn't abandoned one very important job: "I have to go out and cut the Christmas tree for inside the bridge," he says. Weathers grew up in Lowell, and though his early adult years flung him as far as Eastern Oregon and Alaska, when he came back to the area for graduate school, he stayed in Lowell to raise a family of his own. "We try to have fun in Lowell," Weathers says, "and to celebrate every holiday." And in this season, that means decorating a beloved old bridge with holiday lights and good cheer.

Built in 1945 on the footprint of the original built in 1906 — a bridge that traced a ferry crossing used by the area's pioneers — the current Lowell covered bridge "represents the community," Weathers notes. Travelers may zoom past the bridge to head back and forth along Highway 58, but its new restoration and interpretive center make the cozy structure well worth a stop. And at the holidays, the bridge holds something even more dear in this day and age: that small-town feeling.

"We decorated the bridge even before it was restored," he says. "But we didn't have an organized get-together then. We just put the lights up and turned them on." Everything changed when, seven years ago, the town put together the funding for its restoration. Lowell's iconic bridge looks the same as it did in '45, but now, with a new roof, deck and siding, it's protected from the elements for coming generations. And that's something to celebrate.

Decorating the bridge, and holding a ceremony to light it, has brought this little town closer together. "We cut some boughs, find some wide red ribbon and hang those on the bridge," he says. "We sing carols. The grange serves Christmas cookies, hot cider and punch. There's a tuba concert, and the high school music department performs."

When asked if folks who aren't from Lowell will enjoy the festivities, Weathers is emphatic, "Everyone is welcome. And they should come back the next day for our boat parade. We decorate boats and run 'em around the lake at night and people watch from the shore." ■

Celebrate the season Lowell-style 7 pm Saturday, Dec. 7, at the covered bridge, and after dark Sunday, Dec. 8, along the shore of Dexter Reservoir. Lights go on every evening until Jan. 4.