

HOT HOT CHOCOLATE

When it's cold in Paris there is nothing better than a chocolat chaud

After you walk around Paris on a frigid February afternoon, there is no better way to warm your insides—and your soul—than by treating yourself to an authentic hot chocolate, or “chocolat chaud.” Hot chocolate in Paris is a serious affair, including silent reveries, silver trays—even in modest cafés—and in more than one café, a ban on serving it too early in the day. The aromatic concoctions found here bring to mind Willy Wonka more than Nestlé's Quik. Paris-style hot chocolate is richer and thicker than what you normally find in the U.S. It often requires a spoon, a glass of water—and a moment to catch your breath.

Many Paris visitors have tried the chocolat chaud à l'Africain at the world-famous Café Angelina on Rue de Rivoli, or have enjoyed Ladurée's version in its old-fashioned salon de thé on Rue Royale (and several other locations). Others have sipped a bowl of it inside the smoky Café de Flore in St-Germain-des-Prés. The appeal of these time-honored establishments is not so much their hot chocolate, but their tourist factor (although Angelina's chocolat chaud makes any list of best hot chocolates in Paris, it's almost always too crowded to enjoy it fully). For the true chocolat chaud lover, the best “experiences” are found in unexpected and lesser-known establishments, of which there are many. The following is a short list of some standouts.

Near the Opéra is a chocolate shop big on taste but with meager interior flourishes. It's called **Steiger** (20 Rue des Capucines, 9th), and it arguably serves the thickest chocolat chaud in Paris. Its owner, the elderly and petite Madame Constantin, runs the shop by herself. She bustles about and, in addition to chocolat chaud, prepares for her customers boxes of bonbons, brioches and pastries, small savory quiches and sandwiches. But chocolate is her passion. Her chocolat chaud, she says, smiling, is “grandmother's hot chocolate.” You wonder what she might mean as she jets off to the kitchen to prepare it. With all her years and experience serving hot chocolate this grandmotherly shop owner has the right formula.

Madame Constantin's chocolat chaud recipe, like most, contains pure melted chocolate, cream and milk. She uses broken up pieces of Weiss chocolate, seventy to seventy-six percent cacao, cut with her own special chocolate (her secret). The giant block of Weiss from which she chips off large chunks is packaged in thick silver-colored plastic. It looks half her weight but she manages to heave it up to her chest to initiate her unique style of breaking it up. Chuckling, she says with a mischievous smile, “I like to fling it to the ground to break it. It makes me happy

hearing that loud sound.”

She soon arrives with the chocolat chaud, and pours it directly from a hot copper pot into a white mug. The dark, thick chocolate liquid immediately develops a film. It is bittersweet and deeply rich, the kind of taste that stops you in your tracks. Calling it liquid is like calling Niagara Falls a stream. Don't plan on eating lunch. One serving is a meal.

Steiger's is the thickest but the next stop is the most deliciously decadent. The chocolat chaud at the **Hôtel de Crillon** (10 Place de la Concorde, 8th), one of Paris' top luxury hotels, must also be Paris' most expensive chocolat chaud (11E). Served in a sturdy silver pitcher, and left on the table for you to refill (you'll get three cups' worth with one pitcher), it's worth



every euro. The setting for this elegant service is the newly refurbished Jardin d'Hiver tearoom. It is grand as grand gets yet intimate; the staff is as graceful as it is attentive—and a live harpist plays while you slowly sip away. The Crillon serves a variety of chocolat chauds. Served only after three in the afternoon, they include chocolat à la cannelle and chocolat à l'orange. Cinnamon sticks and orange peel lend delicate, taste-enhancing flavor to the drink.

Completely off the beaten track is **Le Bar de l'Entracte** (32 Rue de Montpensier, 1st). It's behind the Palais Royal, near the elegant Grand Véfour and across from the small Théâtre du Palais-Royal. Aptly named because of its any-bar feel and unassuming character, this is the type of place you would almost never frequent unless you were seeking refreshment at intermission from the theater. The battered zinc bar and exposed stone walls give this place that truly local, no-fuss feel. It is certainly not the type of café where one would expect to find amazing hot chocolate.

But the hot chocolate here is amazing—practically a meal in itself. In fact, it isn't even served until after noon. Perhaps the waitress had

misheard my order, I thought, the first time I visited. She arrived at my table and set down an empty glass cereal bowl and a soup spoon. Stares from other patrons meant everyone was curious what was coming. She then brought out a clad-iron pan of thin reddish chocolate, piping hot, that smelled subtly spicy. She poured it, filling the bowl with what looked like chocolate soup. When I drank it directly from the bowl, nobody seemed to mind. For kids, this would be heaven.

If charm is what you are looking for while sipping great chocolat chaud, you can't do better than **A Priori Thé** (35 Galerie Vivienne, 2nd) inside the Galerie Vivienne. American Peggy Hancock has run this establishment since 1980, and it also serves light lunches, hot drinks and desserts. Here, the chocolat chaud is thinner and sweeter than most, but delicious nevertheless. It's made in part from melted ganache—the secret ingredient. Although the interior room lacks Old Parisian charm, the view and people-watching from the tables outside make it a worthwhile experience.

For the best all-around chocolat chaud, head to the **La Charlotte de l'Île** (24 Rue St-Louis-en-l'Île, 4th, on the Ile St-Louis). The rustic feel of this island transports you to Renaissance Paris; images of 17th-century Parisian life surround you. Entering the shop is like stepping into a magical world of sugarplums and edible toys. The window is dressed with chocolate figurines and animals, all made from vintage molds. The molds themselves are objects to behold. Or to step over—beware the dog-size elephant mold on the floor.

The tiny space, packed with small tables and an upright piano (feel free to give it a play), is full of objects to amuse you—homemade fairies fly from the ceiling and willowy dream catchers hang down. Sylvie Langlet, the proprietress for the last thirty-three years, often schedules musical performances for her customers. She also puts on shows with the papier mâché puppets that perform on a stage built into a window between the shop's two sitting areas.

Madame Langlet's chocolat chaud is the star of the show. It arrives in a pitcher on a silver tray outfitted with a dainty ceramic cup, a bud vase of water and a shot glass in which to drink it. And you'll want the water, as the chocolat chaud requires it—it is very thick but not lumpy, dark but not bitter and perfectly sweetened. Madame Langlet also offers inventive desserts like carrot and curry cake, or tarte citron-amande, a combination of chocolate, lemon bits and almond cream. Since the chocolat chaud is so rich, she recommends the simple lemon tart as an accompaniment.

—By Maisie Wilhelm

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