
Culinary Literacy Corner: Hot Cocoa - New England Hygge

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Cold weather calls for Hot Cocoa. Growing up in New England, I have fond childhood memories of playing in the snow followed by hot cocoa with marshmallows. As adults, we can feed our inner child (and our actual children) by adapting that memory to a healthier, heartier, and more enjoyable hot cocoa option.

A pre-made hot chocolate mix, in addition to cocoa powder, has added sugars and preservatives. Here is the ingredient list for a typical ready-to-make mix: sugar, corn syrup, cocoa (processed with alkali), hydrogenated coconut oil, nonfat milk, salt, dipotassium phosphate, cocoa powder, mono- and diglycerides, natural flavor. Wow. Importantly, you cannot control the level of sweetness (unless...you add marshmallows to increase sweetness). Whether ordering cocoa at a restaurant or using a ready-to-make mix preparation, I find commercial hot chocolate drinks to be unnecessarily sweet. Why not put the emphasis on the cocoa?

Ergo... put yourself in control of the sweetness. Start with plain cacao or cocoa powder (see footnote). Yes, it's quite unpalatable. However, you have made the first critical step of being in full control of your drink: you decide the level of sweetness and any extra twists to fit your personality.

Ingredients for one serving:

- 1 cup liquid – part water/part milk, depending on the desired creaminess. Milk of your choosing – cow, soy, almond, other
- 2 teaspoons cacao powder or cocoa powder (cacao is more intense, so you may need less)
- 1 teaspoon sugar or your sweetener of choice. Add more until your palate is satisfied
- 1/4 tsp vanilla -- optional

Directions - Pour a small amount of liquid (milk/water) into the saucepan and mix in the cacao and sugar until dissolved.

Add the remainder of the liquid and heat slowly until mixture reaches a light simmer. Do not boil.

Not fully happy? Add a spicy kick by experimenting with optional mix-ins or powdered toppings: cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, cayenne pepper. I recommend adding and tasting one at a time.

Mix well and serve.



Still missing the marshmallows? Add a little frothed milk to get a marshmallow effect without the unnecessary extra sugar (see photo)

Savor every sip of your amazing creation. Do not multi-task. Do not do Epic. Enjoy alone or in the company of others. This is New England Hygge.

* Both cacao powder and cocoa powder come from the cacao bean. When these beans are naturally fermented, roasted at low temperatures and cold-pressed (separating out most of the fat, a.k.a cacao butter), cacao powder is the result. Cocoa powder is created when the beans are processed at a higher temperature. Cacao powder is more bitter than cocoa powder.
