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**NOT YOUR MOM'S HOT CHOCOLATE:
HOT CHOCOLATE DRINK BAR TAKES A WARM SATISFIER TO A LUXE, NEW LEVEL**
*Easy to create, this cool-weather staple takes on a new sophistication when
served to guests with unexpected flavors and accompaniments*

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. – Autumn, 2006 – Hot chocolate has long been a favorite staple of the cool-weather kitchen, whether mom rewarded you with a mug for shoveling the driveway or you whipped a cup of instant cocoa and got cozy with a good book.

Fast forward to the artisan generation – grown-ups who expect more from even the most basic of pantry fare, from coffee to tea, olive oil and more – and you get the hot chocolate drink bar, a new twist that makes this childhood indulgence a thing of high style that's easy to serve at your finest gatherings.

"It's a great idea that's just been waiting to happen," said Michael Recchiuti, chef-owner of Recchiuti Confections, San Francisco's premier luxury chocolate maker. "Hot chocolate makes you happy. Serving it to your guests with new flavor pairings and unexpected style just takes it to a whole new level."

Recchiuti, the James Beard-nominated chocolatier, cookbook author and retailer has long been known as a kind of culinary alchemist, specializing in matching the highest quality chocolate with top-quality ingredients ranging from hand-dried lavender to deeply burned caramel speckled with fine sea salt or locally grown lemon verbena.

Along with an array of confections, Recchiuti also makes Dark Hot Chocolate, created from a carefully selected blend of premium chocolate they shape into small, pure chocolate pistoles. When hot water is added, these button-sized pieces melt into a smooth, rich quaff...vastly different and creamier than those made from the typical cocoa powder version.

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IT'S ALL IN THE FLAVOR

“Certain dried spices and peppers are natural accompaniments for the flavor profile of warmed chocolate – they open up your palate and let the full flavor of chocolate express itself, as well as giving the chocolate a new personality that’s interesting and inviting. Alternatively, certain aromatic herbs like fresh mint and sweet basil are a refreshing counterpoint to chocolate when served chilled – they’re exotic yet familiar.”

Recchiuti recommends the following ingredients for a dash of surprise and adventure:

- Ground cardamom: a member of the ginger family, this aromatic brown spice is native to India and many other tropical areas and has long been used by Scandinavian cooks to flavor sweet breads, buns, mulled wine, cakes and more. It has a pungent aroma and a warm, spicy-sweet flavor. Be frugal with this spice – a little goes a long way.
- Ground/grated nutmeg: this ground gray-brown, inch-long seed of the nutmeg tree (a tropical evergreen with apricot-like fruit) has a delicately warm spicy and sweet character. From a flavor standpoint, freshly grated nutmeg (using a home grater) is superior to pre-packaged, ground nutmeg.
- Cayenne pepper: a hot, pungent red powder made from various tropical chiles, cayenne evokes chocolate’s earliest history when ancient Aztecs would brew a strong chocolate beverage warmed by the addition of fiery local chiles.
- Ground pasilla chiles: these medium-hot peppers (called chilaca in its fresh form) are blackish-brown in color and are sometimes called *chile negro* when dried. Common in Mexican mole sauces, pasilla chiles add a deep, warm and exotic note to hot chocolate.
- Fresh mint: long a symbol of hospitality, mint—spearmint or peppermint—provide a sweet and aromatically cool counterpoint to chocolate, especially when served fresh. Michael Recchiuti recommends pouring hot chocolate over muddled fresh mint leaves and cooling to room temperature before straining over ice for an optimal flavor combination.
- Fresh basil: once called the “royal herb” by ancient Greeks, basil is intensely aromatic and has a pungent, licorice-like flavor. Choose evenly colored leaves with no sign of wilting; basil can be refrigerated, wrapped in barely damp paper towels up to four days. Prepare and serve as with fresh mint, above.

SERVING AND ENTERTAINING TIPS

The joy of the hot chocolate drink bar is that you can assemble the ingredients in minutes, leaving you free to enjoy your guests. Following are some serving suggestions to help you make the most of this updated cocktail-hour experience:

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- Serve the best hot chocolate you can find, such as Recchiuti's Dark Hot Chocolate (6-8 servings/12 ounces). Made of the highest-quality blend of pure chocolate, Recchiuti's Dark Hot Chocolate is sold in chocolate pistoles (small pieces) rather than powder, allowing the chocolate to melt into a smooth, rich quaff when hot water is added. (*Available for purchase online at www.recchiuti.com or in San Francisco at the Ferry Plaza Marketplace*)
- Serve your hot chocolate in small, four- to six-ounce portions. For the fastest, frothiest results, Michael Recchiuti suggests using an espresso steamer to heat and blend the chocolate and water. Alternatively, you can blend chocolate with hot water using an immersion blender or whisk. Keep warm over a double boiler.
- Assemble a stylish buffet with your best aperitif glasses, demitasse cups and small plates for small pastries or fine confections
- Artfully display your flavorings in small ramekins or other small containers – or mimic the colorful display of an Indian *masala* and simply pile your ingredients in neat little loose pyramids from which guests can simply grab a pinch and go.
- Have your finest spirits at the ready, such as whiskey, single-malt scotch, dark rum or *eau de vie* – each makes a wonderful, grown-up accompaniment for high-quality chocolate. Serve them 3 parts hot chocolate to one part spirit. Michael is particularly fond of the pairing of Recchiuti Dark Hot Chocolate with St. George Single Malt, an artisan whiskey made by St. George Spirits of Alameda, Calif. (www.stgeorgespirits.com.)
- Set out garnishes for guests to embellish at will – vanilla flavored crème fraîche, loose whipped cream, cinnamon sticks – even grown-up marshmallows, such as Recchiuti's fresh Vanilla Bean Marshmallows.
- Have a little fun with your guests – try a blind tasting to see who can identify which flavor combination.

ABOUT RECCHIUTI CONFECTIONS

Founded in 1997, Recchiuti Confections is a San Francisco-based, independent artisan chocolates company. Recchiuti Confections – ranging from signature boxed chocolates to a variety of seasonal and specialty offerings -- are available at the flagship retail store in San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Marketplace, as well as on the web at: www.recchiuti.com

EDITORS NOTE: Digital photography is available upon request: tim@koacommunications.com.

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