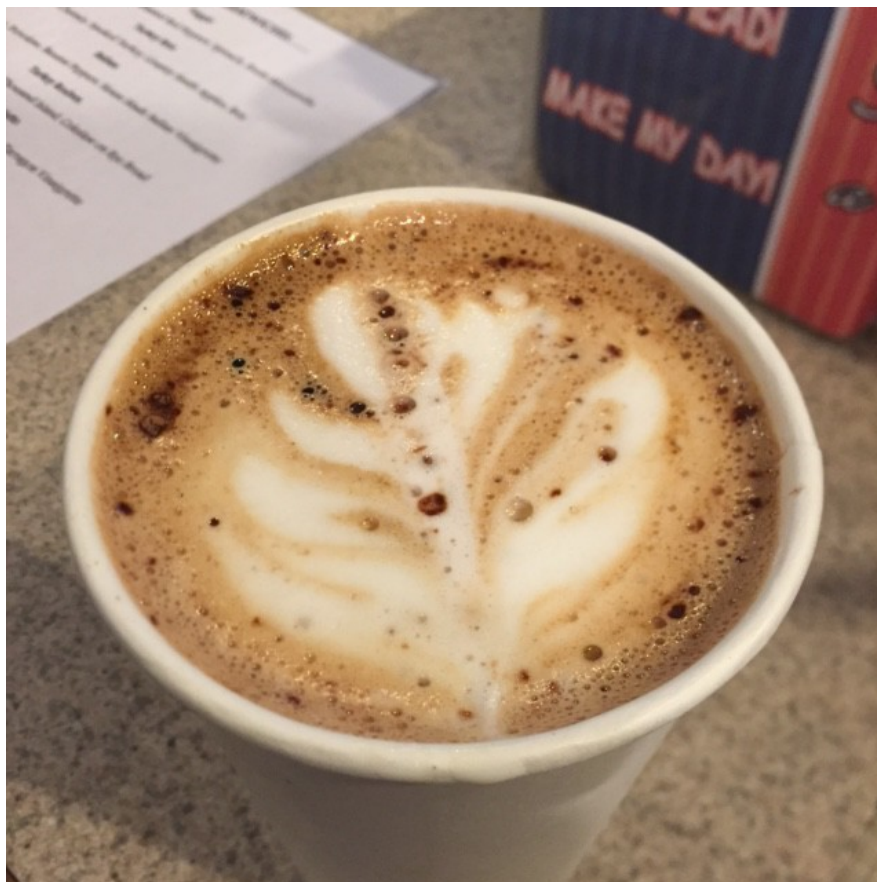


No two hot cocoas the same in Lake Tahoe



Hot cocoa at Alpina Cafe in South Lake Tahoe comes with great flavor and a fun design. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Long before chocolate was routinely consumed as a solid form it was a beverage.

There was a time when chocolate was for the elite members of society. The chocolate tree's scientific name is *Theobroma cacao*. In Greek it means food of the gods.

Dutch chemist Coenraad Jhannes van Houten is credited as being the first to separate the fat from the liquid. This was in 1828. The residual could be crushed to make cocoa powder. Thus

began the realization it could be more than a drink.

Today, hot chocolate is a beverage the masses can afford to consume. But there is technically a difference between hot chocolate and hot cocoa. The former uses actual chocolate that is then melted in hot water or milk. Hot cocoa uses cocoa powder and is usually sweeter than hot chocolate.

Lake Tahoe News spent a few weeks sampling this popular winter beverage. Regional establishments have all sorts of ways to create the drink. For our purposes, we are interchanging hot cocoa and hot chocolate, and not adhering to old school definitions.



The whip cream at Bert's is a reason to order hot chocolate.

Anne only has good things to say about the cocoa at Paul Schat's Bakery in Carson City. A small at \$2.95 was plenty big. It is made from Ghirardelli chocolate, according to the menu board. She said the best part is it is not too sweet. The

bonus was having the whipped cream made as she waited.

Rude Brothers in South Lake Tahoe also uses Ghirardelli. Customers may choose the type of milk. I had nonfat. It's whipped on the espresso machine, making it frothier and creamier; and no need for whipped cream. The medium at \$3.25 seemed like a good price.

Blue Angel Café in South Lake also uses the barista method for hot cocoa. They use light and dark chocolate syrups from Guitars – one is more bitter, one more sweet – along with 2 percent milk.

“If you use the steam wand correctly, it makes the chocolate velvety,” owner Jeff Cowen explained. He wasn't kidding. It's worth the \$3.50.

I preferred all of the hot chocolates made barista style with steamed milk. My favorite was at Alpina in South Lake Tahoe. They use a mocha powder they mix in the back. Then the customer has the choice of milk. I had the medium hazelnut hot cocoa with nonfat milk – \$3.40. This was my first hazelnut cocoa – and it won't be the last. It's on the menu year-round along with the regular cocoa and white chocolate. During other times of the year there are specialty flavors like peppermint. Depending on the barista he might make a design, like a leaf, out of the foam on top. A nice added touch.



Blue Angel's cocoa is a treat, especially because it is light.

The nonfat peppermint cocoa at Starbucks inside Harveys at Stateline tastes like it's spiked. Presumably, it's like having Schnapps without the calories or alcohol in the middle of a workday. The price, though, for a medium was \$4.02. Anything over \$4 seems pricy for hot chocolate.

Prices at the Starbucks inside the Safeway at the South Lake Tahoe are \$2.85, \$3.35, and \$3.55. While it was good to be warmed up while shopping, the flavor was nothing to brag about. Clearly not all cocoa with steamed milk has a wow factor. The Peet's inside Safeway in South Lake was lacking chocolate. Prices are \$3, \$3.30 and \$3.60.

Hot chocolate comes out of a machine at Bert's in South Lake Tahoe. It's sweet (says Kae) and lacks a chocolateness (says Sue). It tastes like any other machine processed hot chocolate. What is great is the value. The mug is big – cost is \$2.50. The heap of canned whip cream made the presentation

great.

The Lodge at Big Springs' hot cocoa machine is self-serve. Instructions are to fill the cup so far and then let go. Either the instructions are wrong or the cups were too big at Northstar's mid-mountain café. It required a few pushes to get a full cup. It was average at best.

At least one day at Sierra-at-Tahoe's West Bowl they had to improvise because there was no hot water with which to fill the machine. The kitchen made the cocoa. It was sweet, but not as overbearing as machine-manufactured cocoa. A small is \$3.76 and large is \$4.20. The small was plenty big, and considering it was at a ski resort, definitely worth the price.



Machine ready cocoa is festive at Red Hut.

Red Hut on Ski Run in South Tahoe came out of a machine served in a coffee cup. The best part was the ample whipped cream with sprinkles on top. Cost – \$2.19.

The Beacon restaurant's cocoa – also out of a machine – is also average.

The best part of the hot cocoa at Artemis near the Y in South Tahoe is the cinnamon in the whipped cream. The cinnamon mixed in with the chocolate throughout. A powder is used with water. It's not on the menu; cost is \$3.

Also using a powder is Casey's in Round Hill. It wasn't too sweet, but could be chocolatier, according to me, Sue and Brenda. For \$2.95, it was worth it. We got a tip in mixing the powder and water – start with the mix and a little water, stir with a fork to make sure there are no lumps, add more powder and water, mix more and then serve.