

THE ULTIMATE HOT CHOCOLATE

Any hot chocolate aficionado knows that THE best hot chocolate was created at Angelina in Paris. It is a wildly decadent concoction made with 72% bittersweet chocolate that seems like you are drinking a melted candy bar. A little goes a long way and the quality of the chocolate is critical.



I've done a bit of research and I think I've gotten pretty close to their recipe. I like to serve it in espresso cups with a big dollop of whip cream. Enjoy!

INGREDIENTS (makes 4 small cups)

FOR HOT CHOCOLATE

2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups whole milk

Vanilla bean – (or $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla extract)

8 oz of chopped 70%-72% bittersweet chocolate (Valrhona is my preference)

1 teaspoon grated chocolate, for garnish

FOR WHIPPED CREAM (Optional)

1/2 cup heavy cream

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract

PREPARATION

FOR HOT CHOCOLATE

Pour the milk into a medium saucepan. Scrap the sides of the vanilla bean and add the scrapings and the bean to the pot. Turn the heat on to medium, and constantly stir to avoid having a skin form. Just before it boils, as bubbles start to form on the edges, turn off the heat. Remove the vanilla bean.

Chop chocolate so that the pieces are relatively the same size, about $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces.



Add the chocolate to the milk mixture and continue to whisk. Once the chocolate has melted, continue whisking until the ingredients are completely incorporated and the texture is creamy and velvety.

FOR WHIPPED CREAM

In a separate bowl, combine cream, sugar, and vanilla extract. Using a hand mixer, whip until stiff peaks have formed.



TO SERVE

Pour hot chocolate into espresso cups and serve with a dollop of whipped cream. Garnish with grated chocolate.

NOTHING SAYS “I LOVE YOU” LIKE CHOCOLATE

As we drag ourselves through the depths of winter, another Valentine’s Day has come along to lift our spirits. Yes, it’s a great time to let loved ones know they are loved, but if you really want to prove it, chocolate needs to be involved. I’m not talking about a box of See’s Candies that you can pick up at Walgreens, although the dark caramel patties aren’t bad. I’m talking about the ultimate indulgence – *Chocolat L’Africain*, a sinfully rich hot chocolate created at Angelina in Paris. It’s made with 72% bittersweet chocolate and is so decadent you need to add whipped heavy cream to cut its intensity.



It's been over thirty years since I had my first taste of it on a madcap trip through Europe with friends, but since then, Angelina has expanded globally. Of all places, I stumbled upon an outpost during my years in Singapore. Of course, it's at the infamous Marina Bay Sands. Even with the temperature at a sticky 92 degrees, the air conditioning chilled me enough to enjoy a cup. Not that I need any excuse to indulge at any temperature.



Fortunately for me, my luck continues with their beautiful tearoom here in New York's Bryant Park. It's just as crowded as the one in Paris and almost as good. Although you can't burn off the calories by walking through the nearby Louvre as

is required in Paris, you can at least put on some skates and dodge the NYC tourists at the ice rink across the street.

Bring your Valentine, indulge, and toast to love ... and chocolate!

LAMB AND SAUSAGE CASSOULET

Every winter I make a rich, decadent cassoulet at least once. This classic French dish filled with pork, duck confit, sausage, and beans is so hearty and filling that a big pot can feed the entire neighborhood. I make it all from scratch with a little help from my husband. He confits the duck legs and I basically do the rest.

This year, I wanted to try something new, so I decided to try a version with lamb. I might even like this one better. It's a bit less time-consuming and fatty without the duck confit. Now all I have to do is pull out that big Cabernet I've been saving and invite the gang over.

(NOTE: If you happen to have a Polish deli nearby, ask for the smokiest sausage they have instead of using supermarket kielbasa. Also, I use a mix of RANCHO GORDO Christmas Lima Beans and Flageolet Beans—available online—but any good dried white bean will work. Most supermarkets have Great Northern or Cannellini beans as good substitutes.)

INGREDIENTS

SPICE MIXTURE (Combine all dry spices and store in jar)

1 tsp salt

1 tsp pepper

1 tsp onion powder
1 tsp garlic powder
1 tsp smoked paprika
1 tsp fennel seeds
1 tsp red pepper flakes

FOR CASSOULET

$\frac{1}{2}$ pound dried Rancho Gordo Christmas lima beans
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound dried Rancho Gordo Flageolet beans
4 strips of bacon
2 tbsp olive oil
1.5 pounds lamb shoulder, cubed
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup flour
kosher salt & pepper
1 onion, chopped
2 carrots, sliced
3 stalks celery, chopped
6 cloves garlic, minced
1 stalk rosemary
3 bay leaves
2 Tablespoons spice mixture
8 ounces kielbasa, cubed
8 ounces Saucisson de Paris à l'Ail, cubed (garlic sausage)

14 ounces crushed tomatoes

4 cups chicken broth

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup brandy or bourbon

1 cup panko

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Parmesan, grated

PREPARATION

Soak beans overnight in water. In the morning, drain, add to pot and fill with water 2" above beans. Bring to a boil and then down to a simmer for 40 minutes to one hour. Run under cold water, then drain well and set aside. *(Note: Christmas Limas Beans cook faster than other big beans. If you use something else, you might want to simmer it for 1 hour. Beans are ready when al dente. They will continue to cook in cassoulet.)*

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Heat a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat on the stovetop. Render 4 strips of bacon. Once cooked, remove the bacon strips onto a paper towel and set aside. When cool, crumble the bacon into small pieces and set aside.

Add 2 tablespoons of oil to the Dutch oven and swirl to coat. Season lamb with salt and pepper and dredge in flour. Add lamb and sear for 2 minutes on each side until brown. Remove meat and set aside. Add onion, carrots, celery, and garlic to the Dutch oven, stirring frequently, for about 2 minutes. Add a splash of oil if too dry. Add 2 tablespoons of the spice mixture to the vegetables and stir for 30 seconds. Add in lamb, bacon, sausages, rosemary, bay leaves, tomatoes, broth, and brandy. Bring to a boil, scraping the pan to loosen the brown bits. Add beans to the pot and stir to combine.

Place in oven, cover, and bake at 350 degrees for one hour.

Uncover, stir, and continue to bake for one more hour. Let cool, then refrigerate overnight.

Take the cassoulet out of the fridge two hours before you plan to reheat it to allow it to come to room temperature.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place Dutch oven with cover on into stove and reheat for 20 minutes.

Remove from oven and stir. Re-season if necessary.

Sprinkle panko and Parmesan on top and continue to heat with the cover off for 20 minutes or until warm.

MUSHROOM RISOTTO

It's a tough time of year for fresh vegetables. Other than those grown in a hothouse, we're deep into root vegetable season. I have great respect for potatoes and parsnips, but sometimes I just want something different. Enter the mushroom. Thankfully those delightful fungi can be harvested all-year-round.

One of my favorite ways to use mushrooms is in a classic risotto. Rather than buying a boring boxed stock, I like to go all-in on the mushroom flavor. I use those dried mushrooms way in the back of my pantry to make a quick stock. You know you have some in the back of your pantry. Pull them out – it's worth the extra step.

INGREDIENTS

For Mushroom Stock:

1 cup dried mushrooms

1 medium shallot, diced

7 cups water

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 teaspoon kosher salt

For Risotto:

3 tablespoons olive oil

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup prosciutto, diced

5-6 cups mushroom stock

2 cups mushrooms, thickly sliced

1 medium shallot, diced

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups Arborio rice

1 pinch saffron

1 cup dry white wine

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons finely chopped chives, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, plus 2 tablespoons for garnish

kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

PREPARATION

For Mushroom Stock:

In a 2-quart pot, heat the olive oil and sauté the shallot for one minute. Add in dried mushrooms and sauté one minute. Add water and salt, bring to a boil, then lower to a simmer for 25 minutes, or until mushrooms have softened.

Strain out mushrooms, chop up half, and set aside. (Save the other half for omelets or leftovers.)

For Risotto:

In a separate 3-quart pot, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium-high heat. Add fresh mushrooms and sauté for about three minutes. Remove mushrooms and their liquid, adding them to the mushrooms that were set aside from the stock. Set aside.

Add the remaining 1-tablespoon olive oil to the saucepan. Stir in shallots and prosciutto and cook for 1 minute. Add in rice, stirring for another two minutes.

Pour in the wine, stirring until the wine is fully absorbed. Add in saffron. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup warm mushroom stock to the rice, and stir until the stock is absorbed. Continue adding stock, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup at a time, stirring constantly, until the liquid is absorbed and the rice is tender about 18-20 minutes.

Remove from heat. Stir in reserved mushrooms and their liquid, Parmesan cheese, butter, and chives. Season with salt and pepper.

To serve, scoop out risotto into bowls and garnish with remaining chives and cheese.

BAKED BRIE BOULE

Are you looking for an easy, impressive dish for cocktail hour? Here's a fun idea that looks great and is fun to eat. The whole idea is to pre-cut the boule so that your guests can easily tear off pieces and dip them into the luscious melted cheese. It's hard to resist!

INGREDIENTS

1 medium sized round French Boule

$\frac{1}{2}$ stick salted butter

1 teaspoon chopped fresh chives

1, 4-5 inch wheel of Brie, rind trimmed

2 tablespoons of fig jam

$\frac{1}{2}$ loaf baguette, sliced

PREPARATION

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees.

Using the Brie wheel to measure, trim out the center of the boule so that the wheel can fit inside. Cut the removed bread into chunks for dipping and set aside.

Pre-cut the boule into $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch squares, without cutting all the way through the loaf. You want your bread bowl to still have some integrity. It's as if you're perforating the sides in advance so that you'll be able to easily tear off pieces once the dish is ready.

In a small saucepan, melt the butter. Brush the bread with the butter mixture.

Cut the Brie in half horizontally so that you now have two circles. Smear the fig jam on the top of one half. Place the other half on top as if you just made a brie/fig jam sandwich. (Note – if you don't want the fig jam inside, feel free to serve it separately on the side).

Place the bread on a cookie sheet. Place the Brie inside the bread opening. Bake for 7 – 8 minutes or until the Brie starts to ooze. Keep an eye on it, because you don't want it to be completely melted, just soft enough to dip.

For presentation, place the boule on a cutting board. Sprinkle the chives on top of the cheese. Place the pre-cut bread chunks and a few baguette slices around the loaf and serve while hot.

THE TRAUMA OF MOO GOO GAI PAN

Of all my childhood memories, the ones that really stick fascinate me. One of my most vivid recollections revolved around my family's weekly Sunday night ritual of eating Chinese food. Most of the time we ordered takeout and I often went with my dad to pick up the food. It was a short drive down South Oyster Bay Road to China View. I never minded going with him as long as we didn't have to actually sit down and eat. Eating at a Chinese restaurant had become a rather traumatic affair for me. One might wonder what hidden horrors exist at the local Chinese restaurant. Believe me, you'd be surprised.



One night my parents decided to take us all out to dinner for the first time at a fancy new Chinese restaurant called Dragon Sky. I must have been about 4-years old. Mom wanted us all to have good manners, so she taught us how to tuck our napkins in our laps, how to use the right utensils for the right job, and how to keep our screaming to a minimum. I was a real people-pleaser, so I wanted to do the right thing. So I learned how to tuck my napkin in my lap, use the right utensils, and not scream in public.



We always ordered the same thing every week: Wonton Soup with “extra crunchies,” (aka fried noodles), Shrimp in Lobster Sauce, Moo Goo Gai Pan, Spare Ribs, Egg Rolls, Fried Rice, and Roast Pork. Needless to say, we didn’t keep kosher. We were in the middle of our Moo Goo Gai Pan when I realized I really had to go pee. I politely rose from the table and tried to dash off to the ladies room. What followed me, to my surprise and horror, were the Wonton Soup, Shrimp in Lobster Sauce, Moo Goo Gai Pan, Spare Ribs, Egg Rolls, Fried Rice, and Roast Pork. I had tucked the tablecloth, not my napkin, into my favorite striped capri pants. Unlike a magician who could yank the tablecloth out from underneath every plate, I took it all with me.



Two waiters came rushing over and started picking up the shattered plates. My brothers broke into hysterics, so I made a beeline for the bathroom and proceeded to cry for what seemed like an eternity. My cheeks felt like they were on fire from embarrassment. Mom tried to comfort me, but I could sense she was fighting back her own laughter. This story became part of our too-oft repeated family lore. My brothers were kind enough to share it with all the neighborhood kids so that my humiliation was extended beyond the family circle. To this day, I have a lot of issues with napkins.