



# FORK & KNIFE

Coffee + Chocolate » By Robin Roenker



**CUP & BAR'S** coffee and chocolate flight.

**T**he flavor profiles of coffee and chocolate run the gamut, overlapping in both complementary and contrasting ways. It's no surprise, then, that pairing them together is, as Charlie Wicker, owner of Portland, Oregon's Trailhead Coffee Roasters, puts it, "pretty much heaven."

Roughly three years ago, Wicker partnered with the owners of Ranger Chocolate Company to co-launch Cup & Bar, Portland's first dedicated coffee and chocolate tasting room. Production for both companies takes place on site, so customers can see firsthand the similarities in the roasting processes of the coffee and cacao.

Every cup of coffee sold at Cup & Bar is served with a small sample of Ranger Chocolate, and the café often suggests specific coffee and chocolate pairings on their daily menu.

"We have a seasonal coffee from Vietnam, which pairs very well with a chocolate that Ranger has using cacao from Haiti," Wicker says. "They each have a spicy flavor profile—it falls in the green peppery, black peppery universe—which they share in common."

Cup & Bar also offers a rotating menu of coffee and chocolate flights featuring coffees prepared in three distinct ways: as a pour-over, an espresso, and a cortado, which are then paired with chocolates that best accentuate

their flavors. "Sometimes having the same flavor is not good. Sometimes you want to balance it with a mirror of sorts," Wicker says.

Finding the perfect coffee and chocolate pairing requires a bit of exploration and experimentation. The flavors can echo one another or contrast one another, but figuring that out is all part of the fun.

Ryan O'Rourke, owner of Ironclad Coffee Roasters in Richmond, Virginia, knew he needed an innovative way to announce his company's grand opening. So, in March 2016, just a month or so after opening shop, he partnered with Chocolates by Kelly, a Richmond artisan chocolatier owned by »

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Kelly Wombold, to host a coffee and chocolate pairing event. The response was overwhelming, so much so that the pair hosted a second event that same spring.

In all, roughly 200 attendees were treated to the delectable pairings O'Rourke and Wombold settled on, after swapping samples of one another's offerings and sharing tasting notes.

Their menu included sophisticated couplings like Burundi Bumoco Society coffee alongside milk chocolate butter toffee, playing upon their shared caramel notes, and Ironclad's Steam Engine Blend, which, because of its hints of mulled wine, was partnered with Wombold's Malbec wine cordial. Guests were encouraged to note their reactions to each coffee, chocolate, and the pairing of the two on note cards at the event.



A latte is the go-to dunking partner for a chocolate chip cookie at **FRENCH BROAD CHOCOLATES**.

"It was very interactive," O'Rourke says. "What was interesting is we had some comments say that while a certain coffee or chocolate wasn't their favorite, that particular pairing was the best, and in their opinion those two complemented each other the most perfectly."

Two years later, customers still stop O'Rourke to tell him they were introduced to Ironclad thanks to those initial chocolate tasting events. "We've done other events since then that I think were just as worthy, but we haven't matched the social media interest for any other event that we've done. Our Facebook numbers for those events were colossal," O'Rourke says. "This interesting angle with coffee and chocolate is really intriguing to people."

Sometimes, the perfect coffee and chocolate pairing can be found serendipitously. Stacy Staton, owner of Rick's Fine Chocolates and Coffees in Guthrie, Oklahoma, had never thought of dipping her best-selling confection—a milk-chocolate-and-caramel-covered pecan candy—into black coffee until she saw someone in her shop doing it. When she tried it herself, she was hooked.

“It was phenomenal. The hot coffee melted the chocolate a little bit and softened the caramel,” Staton says. “It was so much better than dunking a donut, that’s for sure.”

As Staton discovered, the pairings don’t always have to be fancy to be delicious.

In Asheville, North Carolina, Jael Rattigan and her husband Dan are owners of French Broad Chocolates, where they create hand-crafted, artisanal chocolate candy bars, truffles, caramels, and more. The go-to coffee and chocolate pairing Rattigan sees customers enjoying most often is the tried-and-true combo of lattes and chocolate chip cookies.

“You do a little dip, dip, and the latte milk just sits right on top of your cookie,” she says. “It’s perfect.”

Beyond the fact that the two simply taste great together, Rattigan believes there’s another key reason chocolate and coffee have such a kindred connection: their production is uncannily similar. “Coffee and cacao are the ultimate compadres. They hail from a common latitude. They’re both seeds of a tropical fruit that are fermented and dried at origin. And they both are carefully roasted to bring out their flavor profiles,” Rattigan says. “Like with the coffee industry, the chocolate industry is increasingly moving away from the dark roasting of beans and is interested instead in protecting and bringing out the delicate flavor profiles present in the beans.”

That’s essentially the same mantra driving specialty coffee roasters such as Ironclad’s O’Rourke. “We don’t want people to be able to taste the roast,” he said. “We like to use the term ‘micro-morphosis,’ which means that, when we roast, we want to have as little impact on the beauty of the coffee as we can—just enough to bring out the potential of what’s in the coffee. That’s what we’re looking for.” ☞

*Robin Roenker is a freelance writer based in Lexington, Kentucky.*

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