

FOOD SCENE

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Loco for Hot Cocoa

Cure the cold-weather blues with a sweet treat from Berkeley's Casa de Chocolates.

BY ALEJANDRA SARAGOZA

One of the best things about chilly winter days is curling up on the couch with a soft blanket and a mug of rich, velvety, perfectly sweet hot chocolate. But don't settle for Swiss Miss when you can indulge in a top-notch cup of cocoa—with a spicy twist—from Casa de Chocolates.

Located on Berkeley's bustling Ashby Avenue, the small-yet-festive shop specializes in artisanal chocolates but is also famous for its steaming cups of decadent Mexican hot cocoa. And for those feeling adventurous, there's a spiced-up variety of the familiar favorite: In addition to the traditional ingredients—such as Mexican cocoa nibs, milk, and *canela* (cinnamon)—the piquant version is spiked with chile de árbol. The drink begins on a sweet note, offering the usual flavors of chocolate with cinnamon and sugar-infused milk. But soon after you savor your first sip, the strong bite of chile hits your palate, adding a pleasantly zesty kick that's bound to warm you up real quick.

Before you leave with your piping hot beverage, purchase another treat for later. Casa de Chocolates offers unique bonbons (including mescal and *sal de gusano*, coconut caramel, and Inca peanut butter) and chocolate bars (think savory mole, spicy-sweet chile mango, and cardamom-laced *café de la olla*) that highlight Latin American flavors. These sweet goods are sure to satisfy when your last sip of Mexican hot cocoa is gone. casadechocolates.com.

