**Cuckoo for Cocoa Nog**

When the weather turns cold, we turn to hot cocoa. Like the vanishing sun, that steaming cup is a source of warmth and energy, and all-around power, from sled hill to window sill. Mix hot cocoa with coffee for more working power, with booze for more playing power, and with eggnog for more holiday power.

With the benefit of eggnog, hot cocoa becomes an extra thick, velvety and luxurious version of itself, especially with a royal hint of nutmeg. I call it cocoa nog.

Because cocoa nog contains both hot cocoa and eggnog, today’s recipe is ultimately three in one. Whatever your preferences, this formula will help you get there smoothly, with no lumps, curdles, or burns. With what you spike it, and how your guests make it home afterwards, are your responsibilities.

But as we bliss out on these glorious beverages, let’s keep in mind the people who bring us the magical brown substance behind them all. Despite decades of pledges to change, the big players in the chocolate industry continue to buy cacao from plantations worked by children, for whom it’s a grueling, dangerous, dead-end life.

I am happy to spend a few extra bucks on fair trade cocoa powder from operations that are certified to be upstanding employers. It guarantees the working conditions meet basic standards, that they don’t use child labor, and that the workers are compensated fairly.

Another consideration when buying cocoa powder is how it’s processed. The big distinction is between the so-called “natural” and “Dutch-processed” forms, the latter of which involves treatment to bring the pH from acidic to neutral. Some people swear by Dutch-processed, which is milder and darker, while others prefer the more complex flavor of natural cocoa powder. I like Volupta brand, which isn’t Dutch-processed but is fair trade and organic. It makes a great cup of cocoa, with or without eggnog.

Today’s recipes spring from a single change I’ve made to the eggnog recipe generously given to me by my friend Luci. All I did was add cocoa powder, in a careful way to prevent lumps. I then combined my hot cocoa with eggs in exactly the same way that Luci mixes eggs with hot cream.

Luci uses an immersion blender for the egg step. This utensil, essentially a blender on a stick, occupies such an important place in Luci’s kitchen and repertoire that she calls it simply “the Tool.” Here we use the Tool to furiously beat the eggs while slowly adding hot chocolate, carefully raising the temperature of the eggs without cooking them. If you don’t have the Tool, use a mixer or eggbeater. It can be done with a whisk, but that’s a challenge.

The final product is so thick it can be disorienting. For those what to drink something a little thinner, both coffee and booze will loosen the cocoa nog into a more fluid consistency. Dark rum, bourbon and Kahlua all mix well with chocolate, and I don’t see what could go wrong adding all three to your cocoa. It is the holidays, after all.

**Step one:** Hot Cocoa

This first step in cocoa nog doubles as a stand-alone recipe for hot cocoa. Alternatively, one could skip the chocolate in step one, and by the end of step two have a classic eggnog.

6 cups milk
2 cups cream
1 cup cocoa powder
¾ cup sugar (or to taste)
3 teaspoons vanilla
½ teaspoon salt

Mix the sugar and cocoa powder in a bowl. Add a tablespoon of milk and stir it into the powder with a fork until the milk is all gone. Add another tablespoon, stir it in, and keep going until the lumps and powder are gone and you are left with a smooth, glistening chocolate goodness that’s not unlike ganache, the soft frosting-like filling in the middle of a truffle.

Put the milk, vanilla and remaining cream into a heavy bottom pot on medium heat. Add the ganache and mix it in. Add the salt and slowly bring the pot to the point where simmer bubbles appear around the edge. Turn off the heat and proceed immediately to the next step.

**Step two: Luci’s Nog conversion**

Note: If you plan to mix cocoa nog with coffee, skip the nutmeg.

8 cups piping hot cocoa (per step one, above)
3 whole eggs

fresh ground nutmeg, to taste

Crack the eggs into a bowl and prepare to beat them fiercely with the Tool or your best alternative. Slowly, carefully, begin to add the hot cocoa to the eggs. I spoon it in first, pouring it against the side of the bowl and letting it run down into the egg. After about six tablespoons, add it a bit faster, pouring in a thin stream to the foamy froth, beating continuously, “so you don’t cook your eggs,” Luci warned.

If you add the hot cocoa too fast, or beat the eggs too slow, it will look like scrambled eggs. But if combined properly, the result will be perfectly smooth, and thick as whipped cream. Stir in the nutmeg, a little at a time, until it tastes right.