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DRINKS

5 Top-Rated Chocolate Liqueurs

Have your cake and drink it too.

BY KARA NEWMAN



Just in time for Valentine's Day, we present a selection of sweet treats: chocolate liqueurs. Ranging from traditional crème de cacao to a creamy cocoa-and-hazelnut number that sips like liquid Nutella, to a fiery chile pepper-spiked bottling, there's a flavor profile to fit every taste—not unlike finding your ideal bonbon within a box of Valentine's Day chocolates.

It may be tempting to skip dessert altogether in favor of one of these liqueurs—and there's plenty to recommend these cordials as digestifs. However, bartenders also are using these bottlings to sweeten or flavor cocktails that are meant to be enjoyed at any point—not just as after-dinner treats. There's a flavor profile to fit every taste—not unlike finding your ideal bonbon within a box of Valentine's Day chocolates.

For example, chocolate plays particularly well with the rich brown sugar notes of aged rum, which may be why crème de cacao makes multiple appearances in *Cuban Cocktails*, a new book from bartender Jane Danger and owner Ravi DeRossi of New York bar Cienfuegos. In particular, Tempus Fugit's delicious crème de cacao is used to add sweetness and depth to the Mulata Daiquiri, a variation on the popular standard rarely found in America but common in Cuba, the authors say. Made with 1½ ounces aged rum, ¾ ounce each Tempus Fugit crème de cacao and lime juice and a barspoon of cane syrup, then shaken with ice and strained into a chilled coupe glass, the drink balances perfectly sweet and tart notes. You'd barely know chocolate-spiked liqueur was part of the equation, yet it adds delicious complexity.



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Of course, if chocolate isn't your thing, a number of non-chocolate liqueurs also are reviewed below, from luscious brandied pear to a pecan-and-spice number that smells remarkably like pecan pie in a glass. This may be the year to gift one of these decadent bottlings to your sweet-toothed sweetheart.



Italy's Ultimate Chocolate-Friendly Wine

Tempus Fugit Spirits Creme de Cacao a la Vanilla (Switzerland; Anchor Distilling, San Francisco, CA); \$33, 95 points. Made with Venezuelan cacao and Mexican vanilla, this complex take on a staple liqueur is ruddy in the glass and flavorful with cocoa powder, almond, vanilla and a touch of hazelnut richness on the long finish. Viscous and slightly too thick for straight-up sipping, this is a tasty upgrade for cocktails. Based on a 19th-century recipe.

Patron XO Café Dark Cocoa (Mexico; Patron Spirits Company, Las Vegas, NV); \$25, 92 points. This deep-brown coffee liqueur made with tequila and Criollo chocolate a sharp agave-jalapeno profile softened by espresso and nut-like aromas and flavors. It coats the tongue with espresso and a barely perceptible dark chocolate note—it doesn't really read as chocolate; it reads more like a tequila espresso-tini.

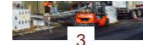
Bottega Gianduia Liqueur (Italy; Palm Bay International, Boca Raton, FL); \$25, 91 points. Resembling chocolate milk in the glass, this decadent, dessert-like sipper melts like a chocolate truffle, coating the tongue and palate with creamy, milky, rich hazelnut and cocoa flavors. Chocolate-lovers will enjoy this velvety, luscious treat.

Bols Crème de Cacao Liqueur (The Netherlands; Lucas Bols USA, New York, NY); \$12/1L, 90 points. This clear spirit has a mild cocoa scent and sweet, mocha-like flavor with a surprising flick of espresso on the finish. Relatively thick and viscous, this liqueur is recommended for mixing rather than sipping. **Best Buy.**

Cour di Cioccolata (Italy; Cora Imports, Countyside, IL); \$25/375, 88 points. Described as a "chocolate grappa," this liquid is thick and opaque brown in the glass, with an oily sheen on top. The aroma is both chocolaty and boozy; on the palate, it's thick and tongue-coating at first, with a pleasing, not-too-sweet cocoa powder quality, but the grappa shows up on the palate-cleansing finish. Packaged with two sleeves of ice cream cone-like wafers tucked inside the box. Made in Trentino, Italy.

Other Liqueurs

Belle de Brillet Pear Liqueur (France; Kobrand Corp, New York, NY); \$46, 96 points. This Cognac-based liqueur incorporates 20 pounds of pears in each 750-ml bottle, yielding a rich golden hue and bold fresh-pear scent. As a digestif-worthy sipper, look for a balanced honey and vanilla flavor profile, with a suggestion of pear on the finish. Ideal for cocktails, baking or sipping straight.



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Saliza Amaretto (Italy; Niche Import Co., Cedar Knolls, NJ); \$30, 92 points.

Distilled from almonds, not just flavored, this tawny liqueur offers bold, sweet almond and marzipan flavors without becoming too heavy or cloying, braced up by a sprinkle of cinnamon on the finish. Ideal as a dessert pairing, or for use in sweetening cocktails or baked goods.

Ancho Reyes Ancho Chile Liqueur (Mexico; William Grant & Sons, New York, NY); \$33, 91 points.

Though it's made with ancho chiles, this liqueur is modest on the spice scale. Caramel-y brown in the glass, look for a lightly herbaceous aroma similar to root beer and rounded flavors that mix caramel and cocoa with raisin and cinnamon heat, with a faint smokiness on the finish. Particularly harmonious mixed in cocktails with brown spirits like whiskey.

Seattle Distilling Coffee Liqueur (USA; Seattle Distilling, Vashon, WA); \$21, 89

points. This small-batch liqueur bears more than a passing resemblance to a cup of joe, with its deep brown hue and lightly sweetened coffee scent and flavor, finishing long and medium bodied. Made with a vodka base and The Vashon Island Coffee Roasterie's Orca Blend, a medium roast that supports Puget Sound whale research.

Rivulet Artisan Pecan Liqueur (USA; C88 Holdings, Louisville, KY); \$35, 89 points.

This amber liqueur features a rich pecan pie scent and a very sweet flavor profile that mingles caramel, baking spice and oak, finishing long and sticky. Though made with a brandy base (and pecans), this liqueur almost reads like flavored whiskey.

Peligroso Tequila Liqueur Cinnamon (Mexico; Peligroso Spirits, San Clemente, CA); \$30, 88 points.

Rose-gold in the glass, the dried-fruit characteristics of this liqueur suggest mulled wine or amber vermouth, showing raisins, dried figs, apple cider and cinnamon, with a touch of cinnamon red-hot candy at the back of the palate. Not too sweet, and warms all the way down. Made with silver tequila infused with natural cinnamon extract.

VOV Zabaglione Cream (Italy; 375 Park Ave Spirits, Tampa, FL); \$28/1L, 87 points.

Inspired by zabaglione, the custard-like Italian dessert, this liqueur has an appropriately creamy yellow-ivory hue and bold vanilla aroma. It's extremely thick on the palate, with an oddly egg-y texture and long vanilla finish that suggests vanilla cream filling or thick egg nog. Made with egg yolks and Sicilian Marsala.

Jose Cuervo Cinge (Mexico; Diageo, New York, NY); \$20, 86 points. Looking for candy-flavored tequila shots? This clear tequila-based liqueur, infused with "cinnamon and natural flavors," smells like fireball candies, with a ferment-y cooked agave back note that reminds the base is silver tequila. The flavor is reminiscent of candy red hots, but it's not as sweet as the aroma suggests.

Sweet Revenge Liqueur (USA; Independence Spirits Company, Philadelphia, PA);

\$20, 85 points. This wild strawberry liqueur is made with a sour mash whiskey base, and features a stunning, lurid pink hue. The aroma and flavor is reminiscent of cherry cough syrup, not wild strawberries. The producers recommend mixing the liqueur with lemonade.