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JANUARY 12 - JANUARY 18, 2011

FREE

# DANCING WITH THE STARS

(sort of)

Newport ballerina lends  
Natalie Portman her feet



## LA MAISON DE COCO

Why you'll never go  
back to Swiss Miss

## BILL KIRCHEN

Titan of the Telecaster  
to play Common Fence

## HANDS DOWN

Mittens or  
gloves?



# Mini-marshmallows need not apply

LIZ DOUCETTE takes a seat at La Maison de Coco's white oak bar and sips her *chocolat chaud* the way it's meant to be enjoyed

## LA MAISON DE COCO



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When dessert caterer Michele De Luca-Verley opened La Maison de Coco — the newest gourmet establishment on Bellevue Avenue (across from The Viking Hotel) — in early December, she faced an immediate conundrum. Customers were asking for beverages “to go.” And she had to tell them the truth: she didn’t have any “to go” cups. It’s not that she wasn’t prepared; it’s just not what she envisioned. Somehow the native Rhode Islander, who has since lived in New York, Massachusetts and, yes, France (with her French husband and three kids), assumed people would sit down to enjoy their French press coffee, estate tea and *chocolat chaud*.

Pardon my French, but it’s called for. “Hot chocolate” doesn’t begin to describe what I experienced on a recent afternoon with sun streaming in at the Coco bar. Seriously, this was nothing like that dark, scalding (to the point of tongue-burning) drink that pours forth at the push of a button into Styrofoam cups at ski lodges across New England. Or gets rehydrated from a sugary mix with or without mini-marshmallows. Not to knock mini-marshmallows (I happen to love them), but the Coco experience is something different. Familiar yet differ-

ent. Foreign yet local. It’s also not so much hot as warm chocolate. Or, more accurately, warm milk heated sloooowly then poured over chocolate *ganache*. That being a blend of bittersweet Madagascar cacao and Rhode Island cream. Mine had essence of plum oolong tea.

And there’s only one word for it (in any language): Mmmmm.

That said, I will admit to pondering — as I stirred, sipped and maybe even slurped the frothy manna in my *café au lait* bowl — if presentation had something to do with it. Of course it did. La Maison de Coco is the picture of taste, from its antiqued cabinetry stacked with tea tins to its sparkling stainless kitchen, where De Luca-Verley can work as she visits with patrons.

Then there’s the taste of tea-infused truffles (I took a tiny box home with me) and dark or white-chocolate *mediants* artfully adorned with slivers of dried fruit and nuts. De Luca-Verley cites tarts (and tartlets!) among her other specialties.

“I think of food as my canvas,” she says, coincidentally standing beneath one of two textured canvases by local artist Tom Martinelli.



**Bowled over.** Michele De Luca-Verley prepares hot chocolate the way it’s meant to be savored: easy on the sugar, heavy on the cream and served in a bowl, below left, the traditional French way. PHOTOS BY DAVE HANSEN

Bizarrely enough, La Maison de Coco — named for a dear family friend, though it’s easy to imagine one or two other explanations\* — is considered a fast food establishment by the City of Newport. De Luca-Verley laughs as she describes standing before the city’s zoning board.

“I tried to tell them, ‘That’s really not what it is.’”

But since food (dessert counts) is created on the premises ready to be taken home for consumption, the classification stuck. And the shop will defy classification again later this month when it starts offering pastry classes and co-hosts a Cheese and Chocolate Fondue Night (Jan. 21)

with neighboring foodie destination Le Petit Gourmet.

Just for the record, De Luca-Verley does have “to go” cups these days. She keeps them under the bar, as if she’s hiding them from those who might take advantage (thus missing out).

“I want people to stay and enjoy,” she says. “I hope they will.”

\*Think cocoa, Coco Chanel, *le coco* (French for coconut) and *mon coco* (a term of endearment). There’s another meaning that doesn’t fit quite so well (don’t you just love on-line dictionaries?): *coco* can mean “bloke” or “dude.”

Liz Doucette thinks it’s time to order “Chocolat,” starring Juliette Binoche and Johnny Depp, from Netflix.