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Rhode Island Showdown: Coffee Milk Taste Test

Posted by Leah Douglas, April 9, 2010 at 7:30 AM
"In 1993, the state senate approved coffee milk as the official state drink of Rhode Island."



[Photographs: Leah Douglas]

My childhood was shaped by frequent trips to Rhode Island. My mom's whole family lives there, and I came to view myself as basically an honorary Rhode Islander. Along with this identification came a deep appreciation for the many cultural traits that are unique to this small state. In my opinion, the most important Rhode Island touchstone is the state's official beverage, **coffee milk**.

Coffee milk has been around for decades, with roots in 1920s and 1930s diners. In the 1930s, **Eclipse coffee syrup** hit the market, followed soon after by **Autocrat**. The two ended their rivalry in 1991, when Autocrat bought the Eclipse brand and secret formula. Today, they produce both labels.

A taste for coffee milk is ubiquitous in most Rhode Islanders, and its presence on home and restaurant menus alike is taken as a given. In 1993, the state senate approved coffee milk as the official state drink of Rhode Island, solidifying its status as the head honcho beverage.

When I began attending college in Rhode Island, I was surprised and amused when all my friends were perplexed at the dual coffee milk/chocolate milk dispensers in the cafeterias. For me, coffee milk was a natural pairing to its more universally accepted and consumed chocolate counterpart. But after failing to explain coffee milk's importance over and over, and when asked for concrete proof of the drink's existence and deliciousness, I decided it was time for a definitive answer. That's right. **It was time for a taste test.**

The Three Competitors

- **Autocrat**: probably the most recognized and commonplace syrup.
- **Eclipse**: also an old standby.
- **Morning Glory**: a newcomer to the scene.

Along with a panel of qualified tasters, I put each syrup to the test.

The Methods

The methods were straightforward, and OK, not that scientific. The "recipe" calls for **two tablespoons of syrup for 8 ounces of milk**. Because I was using half-size glasses, each glass got what I approximated to be one tablespoon. I figured my ample experience with both coffee milk preparation and tablespoon dolloping would ensure relative accuracy of measurement.

The Results



Autocrat: Some comments from tasters included "sweet"; "you only get the coffee at the end"; and "this tastes like nothing." Overall, this syrup had a simultaneously cloyingly sweet and nonexistent flavor. Definitely didn't suit our coffee milk needs.



Eclipse This syrup was a step in the right direction. Tasters noted that "it tastes like vanilla," and there was slightly more flavor. One taster even identified Eclipse as his favorite, pointing to it with a simple "that's good." Although to be fair, it basically tasted like Autocrat.



Morning Glory: "Mmm... coffee ice cream!" "Tastes exactly like milky, sweet coffee." "Tastes more deeply flavored." Clearly tasters agreed that Morning Glory was the easy winner. Whereas the other syrups list high fructose corn syrup as the first ingredient, the only ingredients in this delicious product are cane sugar, water, and coffee. As it should be.

This taste test ended up easy to call. I'm not sure how receptive true Rhode Island natives would be to a dramatic change in their coffee milk recipe. But for anyone looking to experience a delicious version of a traditional beverage, **Morning Glory syrup is the way to go**. It's only available in grocery stores in the Northeast, but head to their [website](#) for a list of retailers.

About the author: Leah Douglas is a college student in Providence, Rhode Island. She's thinking of studying public policy, or ideally creating her own major related to food policy and studies. She's currently enjoying the challenge of mapping toodie destinations in Providence!

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21 Comments:

I have a corn allergy so the information on Morning Glory makes it the clear winner for me as well. Thanks.
hooftrog at 9:13AM on 04/09/10

Thanks for the taste test. I plan to pick up some Morning Glory on my next trip to RI.
Having said that, in fairness to the Autocrat folks, I think you should have tried their third label, Coffee Time, which is considered to have more coffee flavor than the other two.
BobinVa at 9:26AM on 04/09/10

It's a shame. One has to wonder what the original recipes for Autocrat and Eclipse were like. You know, before the great HFCS debacle of the 1990s.
load3000 at 9:35AM on 04/09/10

I just moved to RI last year, and already I'm a huge coffee milk enthusiast. It is one of the many things I've come to love about this quirky little state!
famousnose at 9:59AM on 04/09/10

@BobinVa - I'm sad I missed it! I'll keep an eye out, thanks for the lead. :)
Leah Douglas at 10:18AM on 04/09/10

my husband and i lived in MA many years ago and loved Autocrat. we recently ordered a case of the mix, as we live in CO now and its not available. it doesn't taste the same anymore... maybe we're missing the sea air and that made the difference. what am i going to do with a case of this stuff!
kalcooks at 10:36AM on 04/09/10

I must have been a Rhode Islander in a former life! This is how I've always preferred to drink my "coffee". Mostly milk, a few shots of regular Folger's coffee and a good heaping of sugar.
Wish I knew someone from up that way to try the Morning Glory, but I'll just have to stick to my way of making it.
MissBrownEyes at 11:00AM on 04/09/10

Autocrat has to be one of the strangest food brand names I've ever heard. Did this word have positive connotations in the 1930s? The jaunty little red bird on the label just increases the weirdness factor (is it supposed to be a bird-dictator?) and coffee milk is fairly weird to begin with. Fun article!
squid pro quo at 11:26AM on 04/09/10

I grew up drinking coffee milk in Brooklyn and never new it was from RI, but always loved it. I don't know the name of the brand of syrup that we used, but I don't think it is one of your 3. It's great that you are raising awareness of coffee milk as I've been confronted with the same weird looks, you can also use the syrup instead of chocolate syrup to make something like a coffee egg cream.
My one complaint is that though I'm sure you are well experienced making coffee milk, for a tasting and comparison you really should have consistently measured out the syrup and milk, this would take no more than 5 seconds with a scale. I think Serious eats need to promote Kenji to head tester and standards controller as no one does double blind taste tests like Kenji.
Noah_With_Suspenders at 11:49AM on 04/09/10

I'm quite glad I didn't grow up in Rhode Island then, lol. I'm unusual in the fact that I drink my coffee black (with the exception of lattes/cappuccinos) but don't like coffee "flavorings" in other applications. Examples such as Kahlua or even iced coffees and coffee ice cream. So this is the complete opposite of what I normally drink and literally "a little coffee with your cream and sugar".
winterut at 11:49AM on 04/09/10

Coffee Time was the brand of choice at my grandmother's house, which was the only place we ever got coffee milk. OM NOM NOM.
DrGaellon at 12:15PM on 04/09/10

omg coffee milk i haven't thought about that for years. i grew up in MA and was introduced during a wknd trip to RI, and became addicted for most of my childhood. and it was definitely coffee time brand that we used, same as @drgaellon!
megannesta at 2:02PM on 04/09/10

Wow. Coffee milk brings back memories of college days in Providence. Specifically of a night I spent in jail in East Providence where the cops brought me a half pint of coffee milk and a burger to eat in my cell at who knows what time. It was awesome.
simon at 2:06PM on 04/09/10

Seconding BobinVa, here. Coffee Time is great stuff. Anyone in NYC wanting to try it, you can find it at the Food Emporium near Union Square. And save yourself from being ripped off paying the outrageous price Momofuku Milk Bar charges for coffee milk.
growler at 2:59PM on 04/09/10

Yeah, I was really surprised to learn there was such a thing as coffee milk when I went to Brown. Unfortunately, I never tried it! Good thing I can still go back and ask my friends to guest me into the dining hall if I suddenly have a craving :)
slint at 3:02PM on 04/09/10

Down here in Brooklyn I just tried Ronnybrook's coffee milk and it did not disappoint. Especially with a sugared apple cider donut.
bilynbaker at 3:08PM on 04/09/10

@growler - Agreed. Plus, Momofuku Milk Bar's coffee milk is terrible...
My bf and I were in Providence several months ago and made sure to stock up on the coffee milk goodies. We actually bought the same three from some grocery store I don't remember, but I'm sure he would. Morning Glory tastes SO different and SO good. I believe we're rationing it...
jourgy at 6:29PM on 04/09/10

coffee milk! what a blast from the past. the stuff hasn't touched my lips since my days at brown. p.s. kind of jealous they actually serve it at the ratty now.
lckmyspoon at 12:04AM on 04/12/10

Homemade coffee milk
2t instant espresso powder
2t hot simple syrup
12 oz ice cold milk
Mix the simple syrup with the espresso powder then add the milk and enjoy.
double0 at 3:02PM on 04/12/10

Coffee milk is amazing. I've spent my whole life in Rhode Island- its a staple.
foodie19 at 8:24PM on 04/15/10

instant espresso powder, sugar, milk, and a tray of ice cubes, buzzed in the blender. soooo good.
cyberc0ta at 12:43PM on 06/11/10

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