

# SOUTHERN GRIT

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## The Great Hot Cocoa War

*By [Joshua Fitzwater](#) · On November 23, 2015*

Article and photography by Chris Fellini

*(Lead photo-Each participating restaurant got 100 customized cups.)*

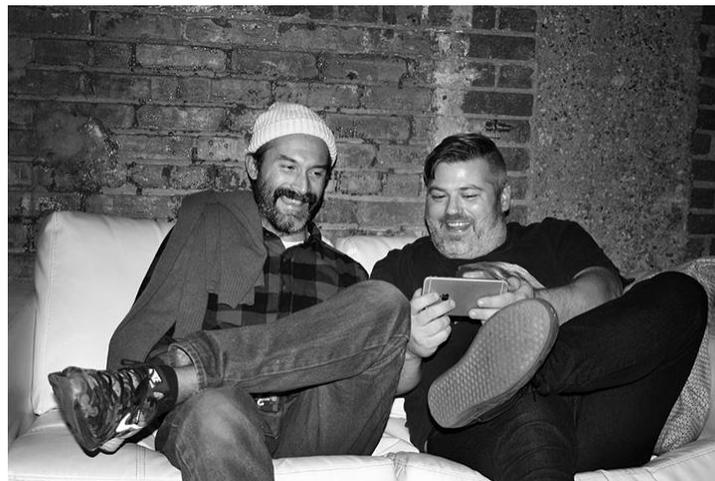
The Grand Illumination Parade in Norfolk's Downtown is the kick off to the holiday season for many people. Who doesn't love a good parade? There's floats ranging from intricate to silly to "did you even try," marching bands from the area high schools and universities, fire and police trucks tricked out with christmas lights and garlands, and, of course, Santa. The crowds turn out, from little ones bundled up in blankets to young couples looking for the perfect Instagram moment. Yeah, it's a real blast. Unless you own a restaurant. The parade traditionally takes place on the Saturday before Thanksgiving during prime dinner service. With so many people crowding the streets, many restaurateurs often have empty dining rooms. This was the problem for Dave Hausmann and John Porter of Field Guide. They could have

grumbled and bitched about the parade, but traditions are traditions. Rather than be grinchers, they came up with a creative solution. Hausmann and Porter teamed up with Charles Rasputin from Work | Release to come up with a fun and silly way to spin the parade into something that would help the restaurants on Granby Street. Thus, the Great Hot Cocoa War was born.



*Norfolk State Spartan Marching Band makes their way down Boush St.*

I met with Hausmann to discuss the humble beginnings of what will hopefully become just as important a tradition as the parade itself. The word that kept coming up was collaboration. Harnessing that collective energy is something Hausmann and Porter are passionate about and Rasputin is a master of. The restaurant world can be insanely cutthroat, but it doesn't need to be. Especially in an area as condensed as Downtown Norfolk, the businesses in the area would be better served by teaming up. Hausmann says that when they first opened Field Guide, they didn't know anyone else on the block. It's a scary world when you can't ask your neighbor for sugar... or receipt paper... or straws. He hopes this idea can begin to lay the groundwork for a tighter community of downtown businesses that can work with each other and help advocate for similar goals. Hausmann espouses a "we're all in this together" mentality that can't help but make you feel like you're part of something bigger. If this all sounds a bit lofty and idealistic, blame the tryptophan in all the cocoa but don't underestimate this trio.



*Dave Hausmann and Charles Rasputin relaxing post-festivities at Work Release*

They settled on the idea of a hot cocoa because, well, who doesn't love hot cocoa on a cold night. The first chocolate-y sip turns every cynical adult back into an excited eight year old. It's something everybody can relate to, but there's room for creativity. The entrants reflected this, as they ranged from traditional to extravagant. The days leading up to the event were filled with friendly shit talking between the participants. Hausmann even joked about marshmallow bombing the bathroom at Hell's Kitchen. The winner would receive an outrageous trophy that looks like it was made out of Christmas ornaments. That trophy would live at the winning establishment until next year's Hot Cocoa War.

I set out Saturday night, fully prepared to end the evening in a diabetic coma. I started at Zeke's and worked my way down Granby, weaving through the crowd and sometimes cutting through alleyways, all in the pursuit of chocolate.

**Zeke's Beans And Bowls: Best Mash-up.** Zeke's hot cocoa was made with dark chocolate and homemade white chocolate blended with steamed milk. They were trying to recreate w black-and-white cookie, and pretty much nailed it. Full disclosure, I stopped by Zeke's a little prior to the event kicking off and they were in the process of reheating their white chocolate so I didn't get to try their cocoa. I am relying on the word from people on the street.

**Work | Release: Last Man Standing.** Chef Chrissy Covington wanted to hit on the nostalgia factor, but with a twist. The end result was a very traditional hot cocoa, gussied up with all the makings of a Samoa cookie. The coconut and salted caramel were made in house, as was the whipped cream, but Hershey's Cocoa made up the drink itself. The kitchen nerd in me was almost more impressed by her set up than the drink itself. The kitchen in Work | Release isn't much bigger than a Ghent apartment's, but Covington set things up in a way that she could replenish their cocoa stock well after others had run dry, all while her staff handled dinner service. While this detail probably went unnoticed by people on the street, it deserves a special award of its own in my opinion.

**The Barrel Room: The Hot Cocoa That Wasn't Actually Hot Cocoa.** I walked into The Barrel Room and overheard words that I will probably never hear in a restaurant again: "Ten minute wait on hot cocoa!" Once I got my cup, the wait made sense. Theirs was a labor intensive affair that the chef lovingly took on, even as the restaurant was packed. This could very well have been a dessert special, as it was much more substantial than one would expect from hot cocoa, hence the superlative. The triple chocolate cocoa itself was as thick as molasses, but the real show stopper was the marshmallow concoction on top. Chef Kris Raez whipped up a triple layered treat the size of a tea sandwich that consisted of two marshmallow layers with a brownie layer in between, all of which was dusted in peppermint sugar. I'll trade pimento and country ham sammies any day for these bad boys.

**Scotty Quixx: Most Traditional.** This was one of three traditional style hot chocolates, but probably the simplest. Chef Evan Emmett just mixed Hershey's Cocoa with some bourbon vanilla and topped it with marshmallows. This was the one to relive your old Swiss Miss days, and would be best served with a side of snowy days.

**Field Guide: Most Likely To Be Stolen By Dave Chang.** The foodies in the audience will need no introduction to Cereal Milk. For the uninitiated, Cereal Milk is the brainchild of Christina Tosi of Momofuku Milk Bar in NYC. It's exactly what it sounds like, but that simple flavor has formed a cult of fans. Kris Harvey seems to have come up with his own cold-weather appropriate version. The recipe uses four different grades of chocolate so you get the full color spectrum of chocolate. The flavor is unlike any other hot cocoa I would try on the walk. It tastes exactly like the milk left in behind after eating a bowl of Reese's Puffs. Harvey manages to not only capture the nostalgia of hot cocoa, but also conjure up the fond image of slurping up that cereal milk while watching Saturday morning cartoons.

**The Grilled Cheese Bistro: Most Photogenic.** By the time I made it here, they were completely sold out. They ran through nine gallons in just under an hour. After seeing pictures of their concoction, it's not hard to understand why. This hot cocoa was just begging to wind up on everyone's 'Gram. The drink itself was a mix of cocoa, nutella, and peanut butter, but the centerpiece on top was the real star. These guys roasted their marshmallows to order and stuck a big piece of housemade hazelnut chocolate bark out of the top. To pull all of this off, they had to basically turn their entire bar into a hot cocoa mise until they ran out.

**Empire: Most Well-Traveled.** Chef Dustin teamed up with his girlfriend and fellow employee Brittany to craft the Filipino chocolate drink called tsokolate. The chocolate used is called tablea, popular in the Philippines and Latin America. The unprocessed cocoa nibs retain a gritty, almost chalky texture. A lecithin froth topped it, and each cup came with two housemade churros for dipping. The drink itself wasn't overly sweet and had a nice salty kick to it.

**Saint Germain: Most Adult Hot Cocoa.** Head bartender Reavely and Chef David Hledik blended a Colombian dark chocolate with a Colombian milk chocolate to come up with the rich base of this drink. The mix was intentionally thick, so customers could cut it with booze without losing any flavor. A freeze dried marshmallow with grated nutmeg was floating on top. My favorite part of hot cocoa mixes is the crunchy marshmallows, and that's what the freeze drying accomplished. Spiked eggnog can kick rocks, I'll take boozy hot cocoa any day.

**Juice Bar 8020: The Only Vegan Cocoa!** There's no reason why vegans should be left out of the fun, so owner Joe Wright made sure he took care of them. Their blend of almond milk, cacao, cinnamon, and cane sugar was the most diet friendly of the bunch. The drink was very traditional, but these guys were the only ones to be conscious of all the vegans out in the cold. I was told by the girl working the counter to make sure I wrote that each cup was made with love, the kind of love that leads grandmothers to force feed you well beyond full.

**Famous Uncle Al's: Best Back Story.** Every year, the owner's extended family converge on Uncle Al's to watch the parade. And every year, his sister whips up a batch of hot cocoa to keep everyone warm. When they found out about the Great Hot Cocoa War, it seemed his sister might finally get the recognition she deserved. The cocoa was creamy, but not over complicated, and came topped with whipped cream from the can. Total classic!

**Hell's Kitchen: Most Drinkable.** When I say most drinkable, I'm not necessarily saying this was the best one. What I mean is that after consuming so many other cups of cocoa, this was the thinnest one I found. While that might seem trivial, you try working your way through multiple cocoas as thick as syrup and you'll be glad to find one you can almost chug. After a week of trying to complicate things with chilis, they reverted back to their eight year old sensibilities. The peppermint stick was a nice touch, especially as it melted a bit in the drink.

Voting was done online that night, and customers and staff alike were eager to see who was going to win. Work | Release ended up receiving the prize, thanks in no small part to Covington's ability to keep the cocoa coming. The Grilled Cheese Bistro took second place, but maybe next year they could take first if they whipped up 18 gallons. Famous Uncle Al's took third, proving everyone likes a classic. Throughout the night, entire conversations sprung up over the merits of so-and-so's hot cocoa and what constitutes a winning cup. Random strangers stopped each other in the street to talk about which places they'd tried and where they were heading next. This kind of enthusiasm is what this event was all about. Everybody had their favorite, but the competition was as light hearted as a sack race. The Great Hot Cocoa War adds a whole new element to the parade and even brought out people who normally avoid the area. Maybe one day it can turn into a full blown hot cocoa fest, serving as the pre-game and after party to the parade.