

Iconic San Francisco Coffee Drinks

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Nestled in Northern California, San Francisco is known worldwide for its strong coffee culture. Some of S.F.’s best-known coffee drinks earned a cult following as an alternative to alcohol during Prohibition, and continued to gain popularity through the 1950s. More recent examples emerged from the current, third wave of thoughtful coffee sourcing, roasting, and brewing practices. These coffee drinks depart from the unadulterated preparations of craft coffee and present creative, and often sweeter, ways of drinking coffee.





Snowy Plover

Andytown's famous iced-coffee soda, the Snowy Plover, is made for sunny days. Owners Lauren Crabbe and Michael McCrory have served it since opening day in 2014. Made with San Pellegrino sparkling water over ice (the ice keeps the fizz down when the espresso is added), brown sugar syrup, and a double shot of espresso, it's topped off with a quenelle of house-made whipped cream and a pinch of Maldon sea salt. Proprietor Lauren Crabbe prefers to drink from the top down like she would a Guinness, but most prefer to stir it all up with a straw.



Affogato

The Affogato Bar on the upper level of the Sightglass flagship bar and roaster on 7th Street transforms this traditional Italian treat. Typically in Italy, an affogato is constructed with a shot of espresso poured over a scoop of vanilla gelato, however Sightglass opts for Portland-based Salt & Straw ice cream, taking it a step further with ice cream flavors like honey lavender or sea salt with caramel ribbons, and drowns them in a shot of single-origin espresso.



The Maplewood

Nestled along 18th Street in Potrero Hill, Provender Coffee offers a sweeter take on cold brew with its signature Maplewood drink. It's a blend of cold brew coffee, milk, maple syrup, and maple extract. For those who prefer to drink the Maplewood from the comforts of their own homes, Provender sells 64-ounce growlers of its cold brew to go.



Kaffe Tonic

Saint Frank Coffee's owner Kevin Bohlin introduced Sweden's coffee tonic to San Francisco in a drink he calls Kaffe Tonic. A shot of Little Brother espresso mixed with iced tonic water creates a tangy, peppery drink perfect as an afternoon pick-me-up. Saint Frank uses Fever Tree tonic, which includes quinine (the malaria-remedying ingredient that gives tonic its bitter flavor) sourced from plantations on the border of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.



House Cappuccino

Tosca Cafe’s House Cappuccino doesn’t contain any coffee, but it remains an iconic San Francisco drink with a cult following. Made with hot water, Ghirardelli chocolate mix, brandy, and steamed milk, the coffee drink was purposely misnamed to throw off the authorities during the Prohibition era. When Tosca Cafe assumed new ownership in 2013, the famed House Cappuccino also received a 21st-century revamp. Today, this drink is made with Dandelion chocolate ganache, Wild Turkey 101 bourbon, Château De Laubade Armagnac, and finished with heavy cream.



Irish Coffee

Buena Vista’s Irish Coffee is a destination drink. The institution serves as many as 2,000 cups daily to tourists who flock to the bar to sip this Irish favorite. In the 1950s, owner Jack Koeppler challenged the *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Stanton Delaplane to recreate an Irish coffee he had tasted at the airport in Shannon, Ireland. Their evening of experimenting with coffee, Irish whiskey, cream, and sugar was the start to what would arguably become one of San Francisco’s most popular drinks. Today, the saloon is still serving the original recipe. As Buena Vista doesn’t accept reservations, there is usually a wait (expect an average of 15 minutes) for a table. If you’re short on time, the drink is also available to-go.



Cherry Bomb

Each Ritual Coffee Roasters cafe features a different signature drink. Its cafe inside Flora Grubb Gardens serves its famous Cherry Bomb--essentially a Shirley Temple on caffeine: tonic water with Maraschino cherry syrup and cold brew concentrate. It was invented by an employee of that cafe in 2015 as a summery, fruity cold brew drink. It's served on the rocks with a soda fountain straw and garnished with two cocktail cherries.



Coffee Milk Tea

Boba Guys, a San Francisco-headquartered bubble tea shop that also has cafes in New York, modernizes the refreshing Taiwanese drink with Straus Family Creamery organic milk, house-made almond jelly, and grass jelly. It's one of the best bubble teas in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Coffee Milk Tea is a creamy combination of black tea, milk, and Andytown cold brew coffee on ice. It's also available with dairy alternatives, such as organic soy, almond, and oat milks.



New Orleans Iced Coffee

It took Blue Bottle Coffee Company six years of research and development to perfect its creamy New Orleans Iced Coffee (affectionately called “NOLA”). It’s a nod to the classic, New Orleans drink that blends coffee with roasted chicory. This tradition was started during the American Civil War, when the Union blocked New Orleans harbor from shipments. Running low on coffee, the city tried augmenting its coffee with other ingredients to stretch the supply. It relied heavily on chicory root, which, when roasted, tastes like an earthy coffee and doesn’t contain caffeine. The tradition of including chicory in New Orleans coffee, in places such as Cafe Du Monde, continues today. Blue Bottle’s mission was to produce a ready-to-drink product with no added preservatives that would not compromise its flavor. The sweet and creamy iced coffee with a woodsy note of chicory transports drinkers to the French Quarter. Now, New Orleans coffee-lovers can find it as a ready-to-drink (RTD) pre-packaged beverage sold by the carton at stores like Bi-Rite Market, Rainbow Grocery, and Whole Foods, or they can order a batched version at Blue Bottle’s cafes, served over ice in a glass—a distinctly different experience from the prepackaged version.



Gibraltar

According to legend, before Blue Bottle Coffee Company opened, owner James Freeman began preparing what is more traditionally known as a “cortado” in small Gibraltar (a Libbey Inc. brand) glasses, rather than in the traditional ceramic mug. “At 4.5 ounces, the octagonal, beveled glasses turned out to be too small, but our baristas realized that the transparent cups were perfect for evaluating shots. Our Gibaltars [the glasses, not the drink] were repurposed for making sure our new espresso machine was up to snuff,” reports Blue Bottle on its blog. Regardless of whether you call it a genius invention or a simple variation of the Italian cappuccino, the Gibraltar made waves in the American coffee industry, appearing on menus at coffee shops from Chicago to New York City. Today, you won’t find the drink on Blue Bottle’s menu—it’s more of an insider’s secret you can request once you’re in the know.

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