

FOOD & WINE

What Is Coffee Milk? A Rhode Islander Explains

The much-beloved state drink is made with only two ingredients.

By [Stacey Leasca](#)



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Rhode Island sure is a unique place. It's the smallest state in the nation, covering just 1,214 square miles. It's home to the oldest carousel ([The Flying Horse Carousel](#) in Watch Hill) in the U.S. and the oldest tavern ([The White Horse Tavern](#) in Newport). As a native Rhode Islander, I can say those who've grown up here are proud of all our little state has done — including inventing coffee milk, a drink, I believe to be, far superior to its absolutely basic chocolate milk cousin. And if you've never heard of it before, that's okay. I am here to guide you.

Where did coffee milk come from?

Yes, coffee milk. No, it's not coffee with milk or milk with coffee. It's a wholly unique creation that is all ours. It all began in the 1920s, according to RhodeTour.org, a website by the Rhode Island Humanities and the Rhode Island Historical Society, when Italian immigrants brought their love of sweetened coffee to the state. It became so popular that a soda fountain operator in one of Rhode Island's diners developed a coffee syrup by thickening a mixture of leftover coffee grounds, milk, and sugar. And with that added to milk, and voilá, coffee milk. People loved it so much that in 1993, it became our state drink. It was an absolute staple in our house as the ultimate after-school treat, a slumber party must, and sometimes, just because. As a college student at the University of Rhode Island, I even had it in the dining halls, and the university still serves a coffee milkshake in the Ram's Den today.

Who makes coffee milk?

Two major brands came out of this love affair, Autocrat and Eclipse, each creating their own spin on coffee syrup before Autocrat acquired Eclipse in the early '90s. In 2014, Autocrat was sold to James Finlay International Inc., a British tea company, but don't worry. Its headquarters are still in Lincoln, Rhode Island. You can get Autocrat in beer form with the [Narragansett Coffee Milk Stout](#).



Autocrat is by and large the most popular coffee syrup used in coffee milk.

FOOD & WINE / PHOTO BY DOAN NGUYEN

What does coffee milk taste like?

My best explanation is that when mixed in milk, it tastes like melted coffee ice cream or a very diluted latte. To make a classic coffee milk, you just need a tall glass, milk of choice (though it really should be cow's milk; plant-based milk simply will not taste the same), and two tablespoons of coffee syrup. Mix, and enjoy.

What about the future of coffee milk?

Other local players have come along too, like Dave Lanning, owner of Dave's Coffee, who shares my lifelong love for this little syrup and [even created his own craft version](#) for people to love.

"Born and raised in Rhode Island, I've always loved coffee milk," he said. "Before I was old enough to go to school, my mom would start my day with a couple of Eggo waffles smothered with butter and a 'healthy' dose of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup. Alongside this breakfast of champions was always a tall glass of sweet, delicious coffee milk."

And his love for coffee milk only grew from there. "When I started school, the cafeteria ladies were in charge of passing out the three milk varieties. Plain, chocolate, or coffee," he said. "It was always coffee milk for me."

[Dunkin' Is Releasing a New Drink, and It's Made With Something Called Coffee Milk](#)

Decades later, Lanning took his love for this quintessential Rhode Island beverage to the next level by crafting his own coffee syrup. "My foray into the world of coffee milk syrup began after I opened our espresso bars and began roasting our own coffee," Lanning shared. "I became obsessed with anything related to coffee. The history. The folklore. The stories behind the farmers. The roasting. As I went down this rabbit hole, I wondered why there wasn't a Rhode Island coffee milk syrup made from high-quality, specialty-grade coffee."

So, he made one with just two ingredients instead: cane sugar and his own Dave's Cold Brewed Coffee. For Lanning, preserving this Rhode Island tradition goes far beyond nostalgia. "It is a part of my story. Food and drink in every culture are very important. These things are carried on through generations and create memories," he shared. "Aside from coffee milk being the official state drink of Rhode Island, it's part of our identity. Yeah, I'm from Rhode Island, raised on coffee (milk) since before I could walk. It says something about our character."

And, of course, you can enjoy it by the glass at Dave's today, too.



Dave's Coffee Syrup, founded by native Rhode Islander Dave Lanning, contains only two ingredients: cane sugar and Dave's Cold Brewed Coffee.

COURTESY OF DAVE'S COFFEE ROASTERS

OK, but where can I get it now — and what else can I have it with?

"We proudly serve authentic Rhode Island coffee milk at our coffee shops as well as a coffee milk latte," Lanning explained. But the uses for coffee

syrup don't stop there. "A few of my favorites include a coffee milk milkshake — known as a coffee cabinet in RI — poured on top of ice cream, poured on a hot bowl of oatmeal, drizzled on a bowl of Greek yogurt and berries, and shaken with milk and vodka for a Rhode Island White Russian — or as we call it, a [Wired Friar](#)," named after the Providence College mascot.

"Part of my quest to keep coffee milk syrup alive and thriving is pushing the uses far beyond coffee milk," he added. "Coffee milk syrup is becoming a staple in the pantry of many creative cooks and chefs." But if that's not enough, Lanning added, "Yes, a cookbook is on the way," so expect me to be extolling its excellence soon, too. Because that's just what Rhode Islanders do for one another. Now, just wait until you hear about quahogs, stuffies, and hot wieners...