

In the spring of 1502, Columbus set sail on his fourth and final voyage. His objective was to get back to Asia. He believed that the islands of the West Indies were just off shore from China and Japan. Poor guy—he never had a clue.

His first landfall was in the Bay Islands about 30 miles north of Honduras. As his ship sat at anchor, the crew saw a tremendous dugout canoe.



Columbus's son Ferdinand reported that the canoe, which was roughly as long as a Venetian galley, had amidships a shelter fashioned of palm leaves. Under this were the children, the women, and the cargo, which included almond-like beans:

"They seemed to hold these almonds at a great price; for when they were brought on board ship together with their goods, I observed that when any of these almonds fell, they all stooped to pick them up, as if an eye had fallen."

—Ferdinand Columbus

It was a Maya trading canoe, about 150 feet long and carrying a cargo of cacao beans. Columbus was the first European to come in contact with the source of chocolate. And as usual he had no idea of what he was looking at.

## CHOCOLATE AND THE MAYA

The Maya dominated the east coast of Central America from 250 to 900 AD. Their culture, art and architecture were on a level with that of ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. And they were great chocolate masters.

The Maya had a written language and often wrote about chocolate. In a Maya book called the Dresden Codex, which predates the arrival of the Spanish, there are pictures of seated gods holding cacao pods and dishes filled with cacao beans. The text states that cacao is to be offered during New Year celebrations.

Cacao pods also appear on carved vessels that were placed in the graves of important members of Maya society. An illustration on an eighth century vase from northern Guatemala shows a Maya king seated on his throne, below him a vase for chocolate drinks.

Women poured chocolate from one jar to another creating a foam on top, which was the most desirable part of the beverage. Chocolate drinks played an important part in Maya gatherings and celebrations.

"The Maya used chocolate to cement pacts, or to cement marriage relationships where they were negotiating for a bride. A major Maya king, or ruler, or chief or big cheese of some sort would throw a feast at which cacao in the form of frothy chocolate was brought out, and they drank it, which cemented this particular relationship. So it was used during negotiations of all sorts among the Maya. And, in fact, because it was used as money at the same time as it was used as a drink, it had the cachet that champagne (which is also used in weddings) holds among ourselves."

—Michael D. Coe

An early Spanish report on the Quiché Maya marriage ceremony highlighted the importance of chocolate to the Maya:

"The form of the marriage is: the bride gives the bridegroom a small stool painted in colors, and also gives him five grains of cacao, and says to him, "These I give thee as a sign that I accept thee as my husband." And he also gives her some new skirts and another five grains of cacao, saying the same thing."

At which point, the ceremony is sealed with a chocolate kiss and they're off on their Milky Way.

## CHOCOLATE COVERED AZTECS

The Aztecs picked up the use of chocolate and cacao from the Maya. They worshiped Quetzalcoatl, the god who gave chocolate to the world.

"The Aztecs had the same approach to chocolate as the Mayas. It wasn't a drink for ordinary people. It was a drink for the elite... as it became later on in Europe for the top echelons of society. And this included the nobility, the

king and his retinue, the palace, and the great warriors that also were allowed to drink chocolate. And it was only in a drink, not in solid form. The Spanish had some really good reporters there in the way of priests who told us all about their lives, and we know that among them chocolate had almost a sanctified aspect to it. In fact, it was conceived symbolically as human blood. And so it really was like Communion wine in many respects."

—Michael D. Coe

The Aztecs flavored the chocolate drink with allspice, vanilla, honey, chilies, corn, and flowers—tastes that did not agree with the Spaniards.

"When the Spaniards first came to Mexico, they saw people drinking chocolate and were offered it and tried it. They thought it was horrible. In fact, one of our sources, an Italian traveler and historian, says it was only fit for pigs. It was so bad. It was bitter. They didn't like the color of it. It made your mouth black. Or if they mixed it up with a spice called *achiote*, which is red, it made your mouth look red and dyed your lips...they thought it was the most disgusting stuff. It wasn't until later that they realized how good it was."

—Michael D. Coe

The production of cacao was the most important business of the period, and among the Mesoamericans, the beans themselves became a form of currency.

The first person to call America "the New World" was Pietro Martire d'Anghiera. He was an Italian living in Spain, who in 1516 wrote a book about the events taking place in Mexico and the Caribbean. The book was called *De Orbe Novo*—"The New World." He reported on the use of cacao beans as currency:

"They have money which I call happy because in acquiring it they do not pull the earth apart as we do in search of gold and silver because their happy money grows on trees."

—Pietro Martire d'Anghiera

The Spanish adopted cacao beans as currency to trade with Mayans in the Americas. But the beans traveled back to Spain for a different purpose.

## CHOCOLATE AS MEDICINE

The Spanish decided chocolate was not only good, but good for you. European medical theories of the 15th and 16th centuries were primitive. Native Americans had an advanced system based on their extensive knowledge of plants and their use to affect real cures. When word of the Americas' pharmacy reached King Philip II of Spain, he

sent his royal physician, Francisco Hernández, to Mexico. Even though cacao was not used by the native peoples as a medicine, Hernández included it in his bag of cures.

Hernández informed the king that the cacao seed was not simply nourishing, but had been found good in hot weather to cure fevers. And when pepper is added, it "warms the stomach and perfumes the breath...combats poisons, [and] alleviates intestinal pains and colics." However, Hernández warned the king, it could also "excite the venereal appetite."

## CHOCOLATE CONQUERS EUROPE

The cacao bean finally made its debut and was presented to European royalty in 1544. The Dominican Friars, who were among the first and most energetic missionaries in the Americas, took a delegation of Maya nobles to visit Prince Philip in Spain. Among the gifts they brought were bowls of chocolate. This was opening day for chocolate in Europe. But it would be forty years before regular shipments started arriving in Spain.

In 17th century France, Louis XIV was sunning himself on the throne. In Tuscany, decadent dukes ruled northern Italy. The Counter-Reformation was winding down and in the Baroque palaces of the rich and powerful, chocolate began its conquest of Europe.

Chocolate traveled from one royal court to another as a medicine. But it soon became appreciated for its taste and its stimulating effect on the nervous system. A medicine with a curative power converted to recreational use.

Spanish nobles originally drank chocolate from small open bowls they got from the Aztecs. One day at court in Lima, the Viceroy of Peru was horrified to see a lady spill a bowl of chocolate on her dress. He commissioned a silversmith to make a saucer with a collar-like ring in the center. The chocolate cup fits into the ring, which holds it safely in place. The invention was called a *mancerina* after the Viceroy, who was the Marques de Mancera. Exported back to Europe, it became the most popular service for liquid chocolate.

## CHOCOLATE IN FRANCE

In 1660, Maria Teresa, daughter of the king of Spain, married Louis XIV, King of France. The new queen loved chocolate, but the king did not. So she sipped her chocolate in private. Within 10 years, in spite of Louis's opinion, drinking



chocolate became popular with the French upper class.

Louis XIV granted a royal monopoly for chocolate. In France, chocolate was tightly controlled by a centralized authority and was only available to the aristocracy.

In pre-Spanish times, Mesoamericans poured the chocolate liquid from one jar to another to produce the desired foam—a time-consuming process. In the 16th century, Spanish colonists introduced the *molinillo*—a wooden utensil they placed in a pot and twirled between their hands. The French covered the pot with a wooden lid and made a hole in the top for the *molinillo*. They called it a *chocolatière* and it quickly became the preferred way of making the foam.

“You are not well, you have hardly slept, chocolate will set you up again. But you do not have a chocolate pot; I have thought of it a thousand times. What will you do? Alas, my child, you are not wrong when you believe that I worry about you more than you worry about me.”

—Mme. de Sévigné, in a letter to her daughter dated 1671 from the court at Versailles

### CHOCOLATE AND THE CHURCH

Chocolate became a health drink, but there was one more barrier it had to pass in order to be fully accepted, and that was ecclesiastical. The main problem was that the Catholic Church couldn't decide whether chocolate was a medicine that could be taken at any time, or a food, which would not be allowed during periods of fasting.

The Society of Jesus, the official name of the Jesuits, was founded in 1534 and was the militant arm of the church—zealous defenders of the Pope's supremacy. They



maintained a tightly controlled worldwide organization. In 1650, they prohibited Jesuits from drinking chocolate, but quickly rescinded the decision when students started leaving the seminary.

“Once it had been decided by the ecclesiastical authorities that chocolate did not break the fast—in other words, that during Lent you could take chocolate because it was not a food—the Jesuits went into high gear and started a big commercial operation. They [grew] cacao commercially through much of Latin America. They drank a lot of it themselves, too...they were big chocolate imbibers. But they definitely shipped a lot of chocolate back and made a lot of money off of it.”

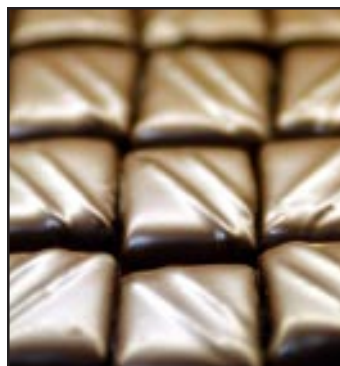
—Michael D. Coe

In a report dated 1639, a Jesuit describes what he saw

along the Amazon River: “The banks are so full of...those trees which produce the fruit so esteemed in New Spain and everywhere else where they know what Chocolate is; which cultivated is so profitable that every tree, yearly and free from all expenses, gives a profit of eight silver *reales*, and one can easily see how little work it takes to cultivate these trees on this river, as without any application of art, nature fills them with abundant fruit.”

Religious orders were allowed to ship goods without paying duties, which made the Jesuit cacao crop quite lucrative. But apparently not lucrative enough:

“A big shipment came into the main Spanish port in Cádiz, Spain, bringing things from the New World. The crates bringing chocolate were so heavy, the porters could barely carry them. Finally the authorities demanded that they be opened up and this chocolate inspected. They looked at these huge bars of chocolate which weighed a



tremendous amount, and it turned out that on each one, only about a finger's width of chocolate was on the outside, coating solid gold bars. This was smuggling of the first degree, because all gold belonged to the crown, not to the Jesuits or the

church or anyone else. The upshot was that the gold went to the king, but the authorities gave the chocolate to the porters.”

—Michael D. Coe

### CHOCOLATE AND THE ENGLISH

In 1655, English forces took the island of Jamaica from the Spanish. Cacao plantations were big business on Jamaica and England quickly realized cacao's gastronomic and commercial value. Jamaica became Great Britain's major source of cacao.

Four years after Jamaica was taken this article ran in an English newspaper:

“Chocolate, an excellent West India drink, sold in Queen's-Head-alley, in Bishopsgate-street, by a Frenchman...being the first man who did sell it in England. There you may have it ready to drink and also unmade at easy rates, and taught the use thereof, it being for its excellent qualities so much esteemed in all places. It cures and preserves the body of many diseases.”

Chocolate, coffee, tea, and sugar all entered England at the same time and at the highest social levels, but that soon changed. Unlike France, England was a nation of shopkeepers. And when chocolate came into the country

anybody who could afford to buy a cup of chocolate could have it. The rising middle class began to drink chocolate in coffee-houses that were hotbeds of political debate. The first English parliamentary parties used to meet in these coffee houses.

During the mid-1600s, Dr. Henry Stubbes was the great English authority on chocolate and personally prepared it for King Charles II. Stubbes, like most of his contemporaries in England and on the continent, considered chocolate an aphrodisiac. He published an essay on the erotic properties of chocolate, which sent chocolate sales through the roof. It was thought of as the Viagra of the 1600s.

When colonial officials were assigned to their posts in Virginia and Massachusetts they brought chocolate to North America. But in Europe, it remained the drink of the upper class.

## FROM THE BEAN TO THE BAR

Chocolate comes from the cacao tree, which is difficult to grow, uncooperative, and moody. It refuses to bear fruit unless it's growing inside a narrow strip of land near the Equator. It demands moisture throughout the year and the temperature must never fall below 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

The cacao tree is one of the world's most inefficient biological systems. Each tree will produce hundreds of flowers but only one to three percent of them will bear fruit and the tree will take about three years to get around to that. The small flowers are pollinated exclusively by midges—little bugs that live on the forest floor.

After four or five months, each successfully pollinated



flower will produce a large pod containing 30 to 40 almond-shaped seeds or beans surrounded by a sweet pulp. The pods grow directly on the trunk.

The plant can't even open the pod itself—it depends on squirrels and small monkeys to disperse its seeds. The monkeys and squirrels steal the pods for the pulp, but discard the bitter

beans.

Workers split the pods to get to the seeds and surrounding pulp. The two are allowed to sit and ferment together for five or six days. The pulp becomes liquid and drains away. The seeds germinate briefly and develop their chocolate taste. They are sun-dried and shipped to the chocolate factory where they are roasted and shelled.

The remaining "nibs" are ground in a machine that works like a giant food processor. The liquid that comes out is called "cacao liquor." The cacao liquor goes into a



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cylinder where it's put under enormous pressure. The liquid, which is called cacao butter, is separated from the solids, which are called cocoa.

In 1823, Coenraad Van Houten, a Dutch chemist, invented a process called "Dutching" that removes most of the fat from the chocolate solids.

Van Houten placed the chocolate liquor, which contains 53 percent fat, into a hydraulic press that presses out the cacao butter. What was left was a disc

of chocolate with a fat content of 27 to 28 percent. He pulverized this disc to produce a fine powder, which we know as cocoa.

The age-old thick and foamy drink was replaced by the easily prepared and more digestible cocoa. With Van Houten's invention, manufacturers could make inexpensive chocolate for the masses. The cacao butter that was separated out is also a valuable product. It's used in the making of top-quality chocolate and in the manufacture of cosmetics and pharmaceuticals.



In 1847, an Englishman blended together cocoa powder, sugar, and melted cacao butter to produce a paste that was poured into a mold—the world's first chocolate bar.

## CHOCOLATE IN SWITZERLAND

Since the end of the 1800s, Switzerland has dominated the world of chocolate. Today its citizens are the number-one consumers, averaging almost twelve pounds of chocolate per person per year.

Now, the only thing that the Swiss enjoy as much as money and chocolate are the cows that give them some of the world's finest milk. In 1879, Henri Nestlé, a Swiss



chemist, who developed powdered milk, combined forces with Daniel Peter, a Swiss chocolate maker, to produce the world's first milk chocolate.

During the same year, another Swiss, Rudolphe Lindt, invented the "conching" process. It reduces the size of the particles and gives solid chocolate a smooth mellowness.

Chocolate contains theobromine, which is an alkaloid, and like all alkaloids it will stimulate the central nervous system. It also contains small amounts of caffeine, but how the caffeine will affect you is a function of your individual tolerance as well as your cultural beliefs. If you think a cup of chocolate will wake you up, it probably will. If you were brought up to believe it has a soothing effect that will probably be your response.



The founder of modern botany gave the cacao tree a Latin name that translates as "food of the gods"—which seems quite appropriate, since many of us consider chocolate to be heavenly.

## TO LEARN MORE

*THE TRUE HISTORY OF CHOCOLATE*  
BY SOPHIE D. COE AND MICHAEL D. COE  
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