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# The Condensed History of Chocolate

THE HISTORY OF CHOCOLATE is ambiguous and full of mystery. Dates, places, and names conflict. Stories vary from one history book to the next. The people I met with to get to the bottom of the alleged facts seemed amused by my confusion. Apparently, if anyone genuinely believes that he or she understands the history of chocolate, that individual hasn't thoroughly researched the subject. It was true—the deeper I dug, the more controversy I found. Fortunately, I uncovered a moderately discernible path that I could count on.

Cocoa has been around for thousands of years, but it was the Maya who left the clearest documented record of its use, more than fifteen hundred years ago. Their elaborate system of hieroglyphics identifies the cocoa bean as one of their most esteemed and valuable articles of trade. Cocoa beans served as tribute to rulers and priests. The beans were buried in king's tombs and used in religious and matrimonial ceremonies. Maya texts also show that chocolate was consumed in a drink flavored with chili peppers and the dried flowers of a native plant.

As the Maya civilization collapsed, the Aztec empire rose to power. Like the Maya, the Aztecs embraced many of the symbolic rituals of chocolate, using it for their noble leaders and in honored religious ceremonies. It played a role in baptisms and marriage ceremonies, to the extent that five cocoa beans were exchanged between bride and groom as a pledge in the acceptance of marriage. Even to this day it's rumored that a man accepting a cup of specially prepared cocoa from the parents of a Bri Bri daughter in northern Costa Rica is offering a promise of marriage.

The fabled Aztec ruler Montezuma reportedly took goblets of the drink before attending to his harem, giving cocoa its much touted reputation as an aphrodisiac. It was regularly offered to the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl in ceremonies. In fact, cocoa's extraordinarily revered position within the Aztec and Maya civilizations prompted the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus to officially name the cacao tree *Theobroma Cacao* in 1753. *Theobroma* is Greek for "divine smell," but as years passed, *Theobroma Cacao* has come to be translated as "Food of the Gods."

Both the Maya and the Aztecs used cocoa beans as currency, lending credence to the phrase many of us heard as children, "Do you think money grows on trees?" Now you know that at one time it did. Ancient documents from the sixteenth century show that a tamale could be purchased for one cocoa bean, a rabbit for thirty beans, and a slave for a hundred beans. Even

Montezuma's treasure vaults were filled with cocoa beans instead of gold, much to the dismay of the gold-seeking Spaniards. The most coveted land in warfare was where cacao trees were most plentiful, because that land would continuously produce financial gains. Since drinking cocoa was literally "consuming money," chocolate was reserved for Aztec nobility. The commoners simply could not afford the luxury of eating money.

Christopher Columbus first laid eyes on the cocoa bean in 1502, and he's occasionally credited with introducing it to Spain. It's rumored that the tiny bean was overshadowed by the vast collection of larger treasures he returned with at the same time. Although it's true that Columbus may have been the first European to see the bean, he was not the first person to bring it to Spain.

*The True History of Chocolate* by Sophie and Michael Coe reports this interesting story. According to the journal of Columbus's son Ferdinand, in 1502 Columbus and his men encountered a huge Maya trading canoe filled with Indian slaves and goods from the Yucatán Peninsula. Columbus and his men captured the canoe and its treasures of fine cotton, war clubs with razorlike blades, small axes, and "almonds" (cocoa beans).

From his father's journals, Ferdinand translated that when "an almond fell, they [the natives] all stooped to pick it up, as if an eye had fallen." Lacking a translator, Columbus was not able to ascertain the value of the "almonds." After that encounter Columbus sailed on to what is now known as western Panama, where he discovered the gold he had been looking for. Four years later he died in Spain.

Conflicting reports make it difficult to determine exactly how chocolate was introduced to Europe, but it most certainly arrived in Spain before it did in any other country. Many history books report that Cortez brought the cocoa bean from the New World in 1519, nearly two decades after Columbus had his first encounter



The higher the quality of chocolate, the louder it snaps when you break it.

World for a second time. This time he came back with a ship full of vast treasures: gold, silver, noblemen of Mexico, jaguars, an armadillo, and a bounty of other wonders. Some books say that Cortez introduced cocoa to Europe at this time, and others do not.

A different theory states that cocoa arrived in Europe by way of friars who had befriended the Kekchi Maya of Guatemala. Rather than conquer these rebellious Maya, a group of Dominican friars led by Bartolomé de las Casas made peace with the Kekchi. Based on documentation of that era, these successful efforts ultimately resulted in cocoa being brought to Europe.



Dark chocolate can be stored for up to a year in a cool, dry place (such as a wine cellar). White and milk chocolate can be stored for about six months.

with it. Yet according to *The True History of Chocolate*, historical documentation of the contents of Cortez's ship bears no reference to cocoa at all.

Other accounts credit Cortez at a later date, in 1528, when he returned to Spain from the New

In 1544, the friars brought a group of Kekchi Maya nobles to visit Prince Philip in Spain. Cocoa was among the many gifts they proffered. All historical references agree that from the mid-1500s on, the Spanish court enthusiastically adopted the custom of drinking chocolate. It became the preferred beverage of Spanish nobility. Each family developed its own special reci-

pes, many of which can still be found today. Chocolate beverages were consumed in Spain almost exclusively for nearly a century, but controversy surrounds this notion as well.

While the Spaniards enjoyed their alleged “secret” use of chocolate, the Jesuit priests, convents, and monasteries had already begun to exploit the financial opportunities of cocoa. Founded by the Spaniard Ignatius Loyola in 1534, the Jesuit order was dedicated to strengthening the Catholic Church. By 1624, there were more than sixteen thousand Jesuit priests operating as a politically powerful group in Spain and the New World colonies.

Although the order worked for the church, it was rumored that its members regarded themselves as independent from both Spain and the New World. They built a strong and steadfast loyalty, and it didn’t take long for them to discover that the cocoa business was extremely lucrative. The order’s power and influence had a significant effect on the distribution of cocoa.

Regardless of *who* actually introduced cocoa to Spain, Cortez and his men were clearly instrumental in the process. They had been drinking cocoa in the New World for years by the time it arrived in Europe. And although they were impressed with the bean’s value in the New World, they weren’t exactly thrilled with its taste.

In fact, most of the Spanish invaders were initially repulsed by the drink. The Aztecs reportedly drank it cold and unsweetened. It was served with a frothy top that was whipped up by pouring the chocolate back and forth from containers held high over each other. The natives also added vanilla, chili pepper, and the dried flower petals of a local plant.

This approach created a bitter drink, far removed from the sugar-craving Spanish palate. Yet the lines between the Spanish invaders and Aztec tradition blurred during the next decade, when the Spaniards transformed the drink to suit their tastes. It first came to be served hot, rather than cold, followed by the addition of sweetened cane sugar. Spices such as cinnamon, aniseed, and black pepper helped complete the makeover.

Between the late 1500s and the mid-1600s, the custom of drinking chocolate spread from Spain to the rest of Europe. By the mid-1600s, chocolate houses had sprung up throughout the countryside. By the 1700s, chocolate was the preferred drink of wealthy Europeans, following the same elitist path that it had with the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Spaniards.

Doctors recommended it to cure ailments of all kinds, including insomnia and stomach disorders, and to strengthen and restore decaying health. People touted its use for everything positive, whether or not there was any justification at all. If you review historical journals regarding the medicinal uses of chocolate, keep in mind that much of the time, it was prescribed without the benefit of medical research to back up the claims.

Up until the 1820s, chocolate was consumed almost exclusively as a drink. But in 1828, the Dutchman Coenraad van Houten invented a hydraulic press that could compress the beans, causing the cocoa solids to separate from the cocoa butter. Freed from its 54 percent fat content, cocoa dried in a “cakelike” form. From this state, it could be pulverized for easy use in both drinks and solid confections. Large-scale production of chocolate followed shortly afterward.

The history of chocolate in Europe is long and eventful. Enthusiasts who wish to expand their knowledge of chocolate are advised to consult the previously mentioned reference *The True History of Chocolate*, a thorough account of humanity’s adventures with chocolate.

Chocolate was first introduced to the United States in 1765, when cocoa beans were brought from the West Indies to Dorchester, Massachusetts. The John Hannon Company is credited with producing the first chocolate in the United States, marketed primarily for medicinal purposes. Hannon teamed up with Dr. James Baker to form the company, but when John Hannon was lost at sea, the name was changed to the Walter

Baker Company. The Baker Company still produces chocolate today, and many people don't realize that Baker's chocolate is so named for the man. It's a convenient coincidence that this same chocolate is typically used for baking.

It took more than a century for chocolate to establish a notable presence in the United States. In 1894, a young man by the name of Milton Hershey founded what has become one of the largest U.S. chocolate companies, the Hershey Chocolate Company.

Milton Hershey was a tenacious man, attempting and subsequently failing no less than three times to start a candy manufacturing company. He found his initial success in making caramels, and the English were his biggest customers. On a trip abroad, however, he discovered that the British were cutting his caramels down and covering them with chocolate. After he witnessed children chewing the chocolate off the caramels and spitting the rest out, chocolate became his new direction.

Hershey sold the caramel business to focus wholly on chocolate. Eager to expand into the potential chocolate market, he searched for a unique and appealing approach. Daniel Peter had recently invented evaporated milk, and Henri Nestlé had applied it to a chocolate recipe. After some experimenting of his own, Hershey discovered that this new, lighter version of the original treat was immensely popular with consumers because of its mild and creamy taste. When the Hershey's milk chocolate bar was introduced in 1900, a new era in chocolate began.

Within a relatively short period of time, Hershey revolutionized chocolate production. Not only was he manufacturing



Napoléon reportedly carried chocolate with him on a regular basis, eating it whenever he needed quick energy.

a chocolate that appealed to nearly everyone's taste, but he began to mass-produce it in a variety of products, such as bars and wafers. By doing this, he effectively lowered the price and made it available to people of all income levels. The future was eminent: chocolate was well on its way to becoming one of the country's most popular snacks.

Today the average American consumes approximately twelve pounds of chocolate per year. Although that may sound like a mountain of chocolate, it averages out to one pound of chocolate per month, or one candy bar every three days. After some careful calculating, you may realize that you've been consuming more than your fair share of the quota. If so, you could be drawing from your international heritage. The list on this page shows a few of the world's more dedicated chocolate-consuming countries.

As evidenced by recent articles with titles such as "Chocolate: The New Health Food" and "Chocolate Healing," there's never

<b>Country</b>	<b>Lb/Yr per Person</b>
Switzerland	23*
United Kingdom	22
Germany	20
Belgium	19
Norway	19
Austria	16
Ireland	16
Australia	13

Source: Caobisco, [www.caobisco.com](http://www.caobisco.com).

\*The astute statistical observer will note that Switzerland's extraordinary per/person consumption rate probably does not account for the fact that a good portion of its chocolate is purchased by tourists. Thus, the Swiss likely consume smaller amounts than reported. But those English!

been a better time to restock your cupboards with chocolate. I suspect that at some point, chocolate will be added to the new food pyramid, right next to its culinary cousins, the fruits. After all, chocolate is good for you. The key, of course, is to educate yourself about which chocolate to eat for health, how much to eat, what to look for on the labels, and what to stay away from. So, off to school you go.



