

The History of Chocolate

The Origin of Chocolate

The Mayans of Central America were the first people to discover cocoa, around the year 900 AD. They learned that the beans inside the cocoa pods could be made into a delicious liquid. Mayan chocolate was very different from the chocolate that we know today. It was a liquid made from cocoa, chili peppers, and water (there was no sugar in Central America at that time). The word 'chocolate' comes from the Mayan word 'xocolatl' (sho-co-la-til) which means 'bitter water'. The Mayans called it "the food of the gods". People drank it every day, in the same way as we drink coffee today.



Cocoa quickly became the force of the Aztec economy. The demand for cocoa, and the drink, created a large network of trade routes in the region. Cocoa beans became very valuable. The Aztecs used them as money, and were very protective of their beans. They paid for food, clothes, taxes and gifts using cocoa beans. For the Aztecs, money really grew on trees!

Chocolate in Europe

In 1502, Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas. He found new and wonderful foods, including cocoa. When he returned to Spain, he took some cocoa beans for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. The Spanish drank cocoa for health and energy. They also found that heating the drink made it taste better, and so "hot chocolate" was born. Spanish cooks experimented with the recipe and added sugar to sweeten it. Chocolate soon made its appearance in France and Great Britain.

In 1657, the first chocolate houses opened, similar to today's coffee houses. The drink was considered a luxury! During the industrial revolution, a series of technological innovations changed many things including the way chocolate was made. First, a Frenchman named Doret invented a hydraulic machine to grind cocoa beans into paste. Another Frenchman, named Dubuisson, created a steam chocolate mill. It was now possible to grind large amounts of cocoa and mass-produce chocolate cheaply and quickly, making it available to people all over Europe.

In 1829, Coenraad Van Houten, a Dutch chemist, invented the cocoa press. It squeezed the cocoa butter out of the beans leaving the powder which we call "cocoa". He also added alkaline salts, which helps it mix better with water, and gives it a darker color and milder flavor. All of these innovations made chocolate smoother, creamier and tastier. The separation of cocoa powder and cocoa butter allowed chocolatiers to add different amounts together to make various flavors of chocolate, such as white chocolate, milk chocolate and dark chocolate. It was also possible to create cocoa powder for baking.



In 1847, the Fry Company of Bristol, England, created the world's first eating chocolate. One year later, the very first chocolate bar appeared. After a 1000-year history as a beverage, this was the first time chocolate could be eaten!

In 1875, Swiss born Daniel Peter (son-in-law of Henri Nestlé) added condensed milk to chocolate to make it creamier and tastier.

Belgium: Chocolate Central

Belgium used to be a Spanish territory and so had access to cocoa beans. Belgium also had a colony in the Congo where they grew cocoa trees and therefore, they had easy access to the cocoa beans. This helped make Belgium one of the major chocolate centers of the world. It was war that spread the appreciation of chocolate around the world, as it was eaten by soldiers to give them energy.



Chocolate continues to be one of the most popular purchases around the world, and is eaten in large quantities at Christmas and Easter. It is the third most exported food worldwide, after sugar and coffee.

Chocolate made in England doesn't contain sufficient cocoa to justify the name "chocolate", and, in the 1990s, the European court tried to prohibit English chocolatiers from using the word on their products, but the legal process failed.

Brazilian chocolate is becoming respected around the world.

