

Thyme Will Tell

celebrating mystery, romance, and the powerful grace of heirloom plants

Chocolate:

Food of the Gods

By Audrey Stallsmith



Chocolate is nature's way of making up for Mondays.

Anonymous

According to Aztec mythology, the cacao tree was brought down from heaven by a god named Quetzacoatl. So the drink made from its beans was believed to impart wisdom and power. When Hernando Cortez stormed into their kingdom, the Aztecs supposed that he was Quetzacoatl returned, and tried to placate him with cocoa.

The conquistador was not enthusiastic about the taste. The Aztecs drank their cocoa cold, unsweetened, thickened with corn meal, spiced with chili peppers and vanilla, and dyed red with achiote--in a frothy brew that would probably leave modern palates gasping!

Cortez was, however, impressed by the golden goblets from which Montezuma sipped his *xocoatl* ("bitter water"), and by the fact that cocoa beans served as currency in the Aztec realm. The conquistador established his own plantation so he could, quite literally, grown money on trees!

Christopher Columbus had earlier noticed that Mayan traders used what he called "almonds" in place of coins. He may even have sent some of those "almonds" as samples back to King Ferdinand. But his search for the spice-rich Indies apparently caused him to overlook the flavoring that could really have made his fortune!

The Spanish added sugar, heat, and spices to their cocoa, and invented a whisk-like tool called the *molinillo* with which to froth the beverage. (Formerly it was foamed by pouring it from cup to

cup.) They then selfishly kept the new drink to themselves for a century! During that period English buccaneers, who captured Spanish ships laden with cocoa beans, often destroyed what they thought was a worthless cargo.

In reality, cocoa was so valuable originally that only the wealthy could afford the brew. It arrived in England at about the same time that tea and coffee did. At the first chocolate house in London, which opened in 1657, cocoa became popular as a hangover cure! But it remained expensive long after tea and coffee prices had fallen. And originally it was enjoyed ONLY as a drink. The first crumbly chocolate bar did not make its appearance until the end of the 17th century.

The Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, named the tree from which the beans are picked *theobroma cacao*, *theobroma* being Greek for "food of the gods." Its beans grow in pods attached to the tree's trunk or branches. Each pod contains up to forty seeds in a white pulp. Harvesters hack the pods down with machetes, and allow the beans to ferment in the pulp for several days.

Then they are sun-dried for a week or so, roasted, and ground into chocolate liquor. That liquor is molded into blocks to make unsweetened baking chocolate. For the ready-to-eat variety, other ingredients, such as extra cocoa butter, sugar, milk, and vanilla are added. Then the chocolate is "conched" (blasted with fresh air) to rid it of excess moisture and improve the flavor.

For cocoa powder, most of the cocoa butter is removed. It often finds its way into cosmetic products like face-creams and sun-lotions.

The original cacao, called *criollo* ("indigenous") is the highest quality, but also the rarest. A hardier, faster-growing type known as *forestero* ("foreign") produces most of our chocolate these days.

In the good old days, it was used medicinally to fatten patients, as a stimulant, and to improve the digestion. Although chocolate was once considered something of a vice, we have recently learned that it doesn't seem to raise cholesterol levels. It also contains the same polyphenol antioxidants that tea does, but in even higher quantity. (Dark chocolate and cocoa have the most.)

So this indulgence could theoretically help fight cancer and heart disease. One controversial study even claims that chocolate eaters live a year longer than everybody else. I am willing--no, eager--to believe it! Of course, with all that fat and sugar, it's still a stretch to call chocolate good for you. Most of us don't eat it for our health anyway, but for pure pleasure.

As the Marquise de Sevigne wrote in 1677, "If you are not feeling well, if you have not slept, chocolate will revive you. But you have no chocolate! I think of that again and again! My dear, how will you ever manage?"

Theobroma cacao image is from *Kohler's Medizinal-Pflanzen*, courtesy of the [Missouri Botanical Garden](#).

<http://www.thymewilltell.com/chocolate.html>