

History of Chocolate

The origin

The ancient Aztecs and Mayans believed that the cacao tree was one of the delectable foods that the gods had found in the mountains and given to them to use. The scientific name *Theobroma cacao* (*Kakaw in Mayan and Cacahuatl in the Aztec language, Nahuatl*), means 'Food of the gods'.

Genetics show that the plant originated in the Amazon and was distributed by humans throughout Central America and Mesoamerica where it was domesticated and cultivated.

The trees produce large pods which are filled with the seeds which yields the cocoa beans, the dried and fully fermented fatty substance, from which cocoa solids and cocoa butter are extracted. They are the basis of chocolate.

Several ancient texts were found, indicating that various preparations of the cacao butter were used for medicinal and culinary purposes, in ceremonial rites and to honour their gods. Cacao was used as a major currency in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations and in the Aztec empires.

Christopher Columbus was the first Westerner to encounter cacao in 1502 when they captured a canoe and found the beans, thought to be a strange form of almond. In 1519, the Spanish first noted cacao as a form of beverage at a meeting with the Aztec emperor, Montezuma II. He was enjoying large amounts of a drink which they whisked carefully with spices and vanilla and served in golden goblets and ate with golden spoons.

Although the beans were sent back to Spain with other agricultural plants, it was only in 1544 that Prince Phillip and the court were introduced to chocolate as a beverage by Kekchi Mayan nobles who were brought to the Spanish court.

Within the next hundred years its popularity grew in France, England and then the rest of Western Europe. France established plantations in the Caribbean and Spain in the Philippines to supply in the growing demand.

From Cacao bean to Chocolate

A tree produces about 6000 flowers which will eventually only yield 20 pods enclosing about 30 to 50 large seeds each. 300 – 600 seeds are used to produce 1 kg of cacao paste.

First the beans are roasted and then de-shelled. The bits of beans are called nibs which are ground through various methods until a paste emerges. It is called chocolate liquor or cacao paste. The liquor is further processed into chocolate by adding more cacao butter and sugar and then further refined, conched and tempered.

Using the Broma process or a hydraulic press, it can be separated into cacao powder and cacao butter. The butter is used in the manufacturing of chocolate bars, confectionaries, soaps and cosmetics.