

**READER'S CHIT**

# Chocolate – a gift from above

Oh the sweet love that is chocolate. How much we love this heavenly concoction. Ever wonder where it all began though? The best way to go about that is to start by who had that first taste of it, and that honour goes to the first European explorer Hernán Cortés, who was given a cup of 'xocoatl' by Montezuma, the Aztec emperor. The Aztecs considered the drink so glorious that it was served in golden goblets to only members of the imperial family. However, it was a far cry from the comforting frothy drink we now know, because back then, it was bitter, and served cold.

However, the cacao beans used to make the drink were also used as money by the Aztecs. Impressed by this, Cortés took some of the beans back to his own king, Charles V of Spain in 1528. The king described chocolate as 'the divine drink that builds up resistance and fights fatigue.'

The Spanish explorers had also come across sugar in the New World and this was added to the chocolate, along with water and the drink was heated. Spices, such as vanilla and cinnamon, newly arrived from the West Indies, were also included in some recipes, and the drink became popular with the Spanish court.

They kept the recipe a closely guarded secret for nearly a hundred years, but gradually, the reputation of the sweet delicious drink spread to other European courts, and it became the drink that one must serve a royal guest.

It was finally made available for all when an enterprising Frenchman opened the first shop in London selling solid chocolate for making the drink. Chocolate houses serving hot chocolate were opened in London and other European capitals, and these became the fashionable places to be seen in! Around the 1700's, the English began to add milk to the drink, and the

vanilla and cinnamon were left out, and with it, Quakers was born. In 1875, the Swiss introduced milk chocolate for eating. By this time, the high tax on imported cacao beans had been lifted and chocolate became a treat that was made affordable for the masses to enjoy.

In 1720, the cacao bean tree was given its scientific name 'Theobroma cacao', a Greek word meaning 'food of the gods'. Throughout its long history, chocolate has been considered special, not only for its taste, but for its ability to provide a quick burst of energy – due to its high carbohydrate level and trace amounts of caffeine it contains. Blocks of chocolate are standard rations for hungry children and tired grownups, as well as astronauts and climbers of Everest.

## PRODUCING CHOCOLATE

Cacao beans grow only in tropical countries, so Africa's west coast and Brazil are the main producers. The pods are like small melons, which contain the beans, which are harvested twice a year. They are split open, and the beans are left to ferment in the blistering tropical sun for several days. During this time, the

white beans turn dark brown and begin to obtain their chocolaty flavour. They are then dried and shipped in bags to the USA and Europe, and later distributed around the world. It takes one tree's yearly yield to make 450g (1 lb) of cocoa.

At the chocolate factory, the cacao beans are cleaned, roasted, and shelled. The roasting fills the air with the mouth-watering aroma of chocolate. The beans are broken into large pieces called nibs and these are grounded, producing a rich brown liquid or paste called 'chocolate liquor' (although it has no alcoholic content). This liquor is the main ingredient for all chocolate products. Some of the liquor is hardened into moulds to form baking (bitter) chocolate, but most is pressed to extract the cocoa butter. The resulting block is called 'press cake'. This is dried and sifted to make cocoa powder. Chocolate liquor, cocoa powder and cocoa butter are combined to make all the different kinds of chocolate you will see everywhere.

To make milk chocolate, the

chocolate liquor is added to liquid or powdered milk and sugar. Interesting fact: the white chocolate we know and love is made when just cocoa butter and sugar is used without adding chocolate liquor. Cocoa butter, plus chocolate liquor, and sugar makes the familiar sweet (eating) chocolate. If vegetable fat is substituted for cocoa butter, the result is baker's or compound chocolate, found in most countries.

Once all the mixtures are blended, whatever spices and flavourings are added, the chocolate undergoes a long stirring or 'conching' period to make it smooth and creamy. After this, it is moulded into blocks and bars, wrapped and shipped to bakeries where it is used as an ingredient in cakes and biscuits, or sent straight to confectioneries.

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**Photo: Colleted**

