

The History Of Chocolate

We usually think of chocolate as a sweet candy created during modern times. But actually, chocolate goes back to the ancient people of Mesoamerica who drank chocolate as a bitter beverage. For these people, chocolate wasn't just a favorite food-it also played an important role in their religious and social lives.

The ancient Mayans grew cacao and made it into a beverage. The first people clearly known to have discovered the secret of cacao were the Classic Period Mayans. The Maya and their ancestors in the Pre-Columbian Americas took the tree from the rainforest and grew it in their own backyards, where they harvested, fermented, roasted, and ground the seeds into a paste. When mixed with water, chile peppers, cornmeal, and other ingredients, this paste made a frothy, spicy chocolate drink.

By 1400, the Aztec empire dominated a sizeable segment of Central America. The Aztecs traded with Mayan and other peoples for cacao and often required that citizens and conquered peoples pay their tribute in cacao seeds-a form of Aztec money.

Like the earlier Maya, the Aztecs also consumed their bitter chocolate drink seasoned with spices-sugar was an agricultural product unavailable to the ancient Mesoamericans.

Many people in ancient Maya society could drink chocolate at least on occasion, although it was a particularly favored beverage for royalty. But in Aztec society, primarily rulers, priests, decorated soldiers, and honored merchants could partake of this sacred brew. Chocolate also played a special role in both Maya and Aztec royal and religious events. Priests presented cacao seeds as offerings to the gods and served chocolate drinks during sacred ceremonies.

Europe's first contact with chocolate came during the conquest of Mexico in 1521. The Spaniards recognized the value attached to cacao and observed the Aztec custom of drinking chocolate. Soon after, the Spanish began to ship cacao seeds back home.

A very expensive import, chocolate remained an elite beverage and a status symbol for Europe's upper classes for the next 300 years. When the Spanish brought cacao home, they doctored up the bitter brew with cinnamon and other spices and began sweetening it with sugar.

They managed to keep their delicious drink a Spanish secret for almost 100 years before the rest of Europe discovered what they were missing. Sweetened chocolate soon became the latest and greatest fad to hit the continent. Because cacao and sugar were expensive imports, only those with money could afford to drink chocolate. In fact, in France, chocolate was a state monopoly that could be consumed only by members of the royal court.

Like the Maya and the Aztecs, Europeans developed their own special protocol for the drinking of chocolate. They even designed elaborate porcelain and silver serving pieces and cups for chocolate that acted as symbols of wealth and power.

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