The History of “the Food of the Gods”

Objective(s)

This report will provide a brief overview of the history of the cultivation and consumption of cacao and chocolate, spanning from the days of its earliest usages by the Olmec, Mayan and Aztec cultures to the present day. The primary focus will be how cacao beans and the consumption of chocolate acted as a status symbol, and how it shifted from this elevated role to consumption by the masses.

Summary of Findings

Theobroma cacao – The Plant

Theobroma cacao, or more commonly referred to as just cacao, has gone by many names throughout history, but it always refers to the plant and its products. It is the bitter seed of the cacao plant that is turned into the chocolate we consume. Cacao is very difficult to grow; it only thrives in certain conditions, which are typically found within “a band of 20 degrees north and 20 degrees south of the Equator.”\(^1\) It is most successfully grown when conditions are kept constant, thus with few variations in atmospheric moisture and in well-shaded areas.\(^2\) Combined with the fact that “Cacao grows well in deep, well-drained soils having lots of organic matter, and usually in association with nitrogen-fixing legume shade trees,”\(^3\) it does best in the lower self of the rainforest.

The fruit or the pods of the cacao tree contain the prized seeds. Each pod, once grown, contains about 30 or 40 seeds or beans, which are coated in a juicy pulp.\(^4\) These pods take “about six months to develop and ripen.”\(^5\) And “unlike the fruit of most tress, even when fully ripe, the

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2 Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 2.
3 Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 22.
5 Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 7.
mature pods do not fall from the tree. Rather, the sweet pulp attracts animals that rip open the pods and eat the pulp but discard the bitter beans allowing the seeds to grow into new cacao trees.

As the demand for cacao increased it lead to the cultivation of cacao. The indigenous peoples of Central and South America are reported to have cultivated cacao possibly beginning as early as 1000 B.C. When the Spanish introduced cacao to Europe in the early 1500’s, it caused an increase in demand, thus simultaneously causing an increase in cultivation. “Cultivation of cacao spread rapidly around the world following European contact with Central America, [because of this] virtually all cacao crops since have been derived from relatively few wild ancestral types.” These cacao types, which are still the main types cultivated today, are the Forastero and Criollos. “Forastero – type cacao plants are hardier, and, not only do they generally produce pods two years earlier than criollos do, they also produce more pods per tree. However, the flavor of Forastero beans is bitterer than the flavor of criollos, which is why criollos are now more preferred by high end chocolatiers.”

The Olmec, Mayans and Aztecs

Cacao had a long history of being consumed and cultivated. In the early days of its consumption in “Amazonian prehistoric civilization, the pulp and oils may have been the main refreshment and food commodities provided by the cacao tree.” There is evidence that the cultivation of cacao dates back to the Olmec civilization (around 1000 B.C.) and that the Olmecs were the first to domesticate the plant. Both the Mayans and then the Aztecs continued the trend of domestication and cultivation. Due to how difficult cacao was to grow it was assigned great value in these cultures. “In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica to possess cacao was a sign of wealth, power, and ruler ship.” Cacao beans “also were used as a form of money, their value, size, and durability simplifying exchange in the marketplace,” thus further increasing their value.

Cacao beans were used as a form of currency, but at the same time cacao was also being cultivated for consumption. However, “only the wealthy nobility could afford to consume chocolatl, since doing so was actually drinking money,” chocolatl being the beverage produced by grinding the roasted cacao beans into a paste and combining it with water and varied spices.

6 Young, Allen M. The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao. p. 11.
7 Young, Allen M. The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao. p. 3.
10 Young, Allen M. The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao. p. 11.
14 Young, Allen M. The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao. 29.
“Montezuma, royal monarch of the Aztecs on the central plateau of Mexico, had large storehouses of cacao beans as treasure, not for consumption. Only old, worn beans were used to make *chocolatl*.”\(^{15}\)

Chocolate for a vast majority of its history was consumed as a beverage, this tradition of course being derived from this early *chocolatl* tradition, *Chocolatl* being the Mayan and Aztec drink. *Chocolatl* was prepared “by tumbling the mixture between gourd vessels, the beverage was prepared to a light, frothy consistency similar to that of whipped honey, making it easy to drink.”\(^{16}\) From 1000 B.C. to the sixteenth century, these *kakaw* or *chocolatl* drinks “remained a primary component of social and political events among the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and as far south as Nicaragua and Costa Rica.”\(^{17}\) Since the drinking or gifting of *kakaw* was very closely linked to “the fundamental political processes of alliance formation and socioeconomic enrichment”\(^{18}\) of the times. Thus, due to its significant value and its symbolic meaning, having cacao and being able to consume it was a method of displaying one’s elevated status.

In Mesoamerica cacao was imbued with important religious meaning as well. “Cacao was associated with blood and sacrifice in the pre-Columbian period. For Mesoamerican peoples, blood was an important offering to the gods. Not only were animals sacrificed, but people – particularly elites and rulers – offered their own blood and that of human captives.”\(^{19}\) Cacao beverages sometimes were dyed red or prepared with water in which bloody knives from sacrifices had been cleaned,\(^{20}\) thus making the beverages look very similar to blood, which increased its importance in many rituals. For example “the frequent exchange of cacao in marriage ceremonies may signify the mixing of bloodlines.”\(^{21}\) Cacao’s high value prevented it from being commonly consumed by non-elites accounts “tying cacao use to important Maya rituals such as marriage and baptism, imply that while more accessible to elites, it was used for important religious or ritual events by commoners.”\(^{22}\)

**Spanish Conquest**

When the Spanish explorers arrived in the Americas in the early 1500’s, they were introduced to cacao for the first time. Initially these explorers had different opinions about the drink -- some sang its praises while others viewed it as sinister looking and avoided it. The popularity of the beverage and thus the beans grew over time, especially after the Spanish began

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\(^{15}\) Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 21.

\(^{16}\) Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 20.

\(^{17}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 206.

\(^{18}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 222.

\(^{19}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 15.

\(^{20}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 15.

\(^{21}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 15.

\(^{22}\) *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*. p. 18.
regularly sweetening it with cane sugar.\textsuperscript{23} As its popularity grew, demand for beans also increased which meant the intensification of the cultivation of the beans. The Conquistadors imposed the \textit{encomienda} system; “the \textit{encomienda} was a temporary grant of land from the Spanish Crown to Spanish colonists, the \textit{encomenderos}. The \textit{encomendero} was given a plot of land to exploit, along with the Indians living on it, keeping a fixed percentage of the profits from cacao for himself.”\textsuperscript{24} With this system in place the native groups were subjugated to the Spanish and became a pool of forced laborers, with all the financial gain benefitting the Spanish. Therefore “under the world economy of the sixteenth century, part of the Western Hemisphere became incorporated into a system in which raw commodities such as cacao beans were channeled through European core markets, forcing the agricultural system of the New World tropics to respond to the demands of the global economy rather than merely serving its own people and commerce.”\textsuperscript{25}

Due to the rigorous demands imposed by the \textit{encomienda} system the cultivation of cacao increased. Before the Spanish Conquest there were small cacao orchards scattered around Central America, but there were no cacao plantations in the Caribbean islands or South America. However, within the next three centuries the Spaniards, English, French, Dutch and Portuguese established cacao plantations worldwide in tropical regions to satisfy the demand.\textsuperscript{26} This insatiable demand for cacao took its toll on the land. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the land used for cacao growing in Central America was exhausted causing a decline in cacao production.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Cacao Arrives in Europe}

In 1530, Cortes returned from the New World and introduced chocolate to the Spanish royal court.\textsuperscript{28} At its introduction chocolate was a novelty in Europe since it was the first non-alcoholic stimulant drink available.\textsuperscript{29} Within the Spanish court it rapidly became popular, where it was still consumed as the hot, sweetened and spiced beverage that had been developed by the Spanish in Mexico.\textsuperscript{30} “In the court in Madrid it became a kind of status symbol,”\textsuperscript{31} since only the elites could afford to consume it.

After its introduction to Europe cacao and chocolate was not widely consumed outside of Spain or Spanish controlled territories. This was due in part to its high cost, but also because

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{1} Coe, Sophie D., and Michael D. Coe. \textit{The True History of Chocolate}. p. 115.
\bibitem{2} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 27.
\bibitem{3} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 33.
\bibitem{4} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 15.
\bibitem{5} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 33.
\bibitem{6} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 34.
\bibitem{7} Young, Allen M. \textit{The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao}. p. 35.
\bibitem{8} Coe, Sophie D., and Michael D. Coe. \textit{The True History of Chocolate}. p. 133.
\bibitem{9} Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. \textit{Tastes of Paradise}. p. 91.
\end{thebibliography}
“Spain held most of the lands where the cacao already grew … and for well over a hundred years after the conquistadors first discovered the delicious drinking chocolate of the West Indies both production and consumption remained a jealously guarded monopoly.” It was not until the early 1600’s that the new drink became widely known in France after Anne of Austria, who had grown up in the Spanish court and so had developed a taste for chocolate, was married to Louis XIII of France and introduced the chocolate beverage to the French court. Like in the Spanish court before, chocolate became widely popular with the French, and “it became the drink of the European aristocracy,” and acted as a status symbol. Just as in Mesoamerica, chocolate was a status symbol because it was an outward way of displaying one’s wealth since due to the high import taxes placed on the beans or cacao paste only the wealthy could afford it. Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries chocolate consumption was limited but it slowly spread throughout the rest of Europe as a drink of the wealthy elite.

Beyond its use as a social status symbol it was also important in Southern Europe, specifically Spain and Italy, in other words, important in the Catholic world. During the early period of chocolate consumption in Europe it was considered to have great nutritional value. It was believed that “the people who made constant use of chocolate [were] the ones who enjoyed the most steady health, and [were] least subject to a multitude of little ailments which destroy the comfort of life.” Due to this belief in its nutritional value, chocolate was important in the Catholic world since based “on the principle that liquids do not break fasts, chocolate could serve as a nutritional substitute during fasting periods, and naturally this made it a more or less vital beverage in Catholic Spain and Italy.”

No Longer Just for the Elites – the Consumption Shift

In the early years of chocolate consumption in Europe chocolate was useful like sugar, another expensive tropical import, “as a mark of rank – to validate one’s social position, to elevate others, or to define them as inferior.” Especially so since chocolate was “strictly for the upper and middle classes.” Throughout history one sees examples of people desiring what they do not have, especially things or foods that confer status, because by consuming them they can raise their own personal status. This trend happened with chocolate. Chocolate became increasingly popular with European consumers, and shifts in the cultivation and production of it

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32 Tannahill, Reay. *Food in History.* p. 287.
33 Tannahill, Reay. *Food in History.* p. 289.
36 Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao.* p. 35.
38 *Cocoa and Chocolate: A Short History of Their Production and Use.* p. 39.
40 Mintz, Sidney Wilfred. *Sweetness and Power* p. 139.
made it more available to those clamoring for it. Between 1640 and 1680 there was an increase of the number of sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean; this increase in production capacity lead to a decrease in the price of sugar – the key ingredient needed to combine with chocolate. \(^{42}\) This decrease in the price in sugar as well as the increased availability of both sugar and cacao beans substantially lowered the price of chocolate -- making it available for non-elites. During the 1700’s retail establishments such as coffeehouses and refreshment parlors that served chocolate, tea and coffee had popped up in major population centers in Europe, which further increased access to chocolate.\(^{43}\)

Although chocolate was becoming cheaper and increasingly popular it was still not consumed by the poorer masses. During the nineteenth century, however, chocolate finally came to the broader population. During the nineteenth century “import duties on cacao beans and other commodities from the New World dropped”\(^ {44}\) thus reducing the price of chocolate and bringing it within the means of the masses. Additionally soon after the lowering of the tariffs the industrial revolution began, which mechanized the production of chocolate. Such “improvements in methods of preparation”\(^ {45}\) reduced the labor required to process cacao into chocolate, especially in terms of the grinding of the cacao beans. The masses were now able to consume chocolate, and it soon became a favorite drink for women and children. It came to be that “the former status drink of the ancient regime has sunk to the world of women and children. What formerly symbolized power and glory was now in the hands of those excluded from power and responsibility in middle-class society.”\(^ {46}\)

**A Period of Innovation**

The nineteenth century not only marked the point in time when chocolate shifted from being the drink of the elites to a drink for the masses, but it was also a great period of innovation in chocolate production. In 1828 Dutch chemist Coenraad Johannes Van Houten developed a process for the manufacturing powdered chocolate with a lower fat content. This process called “Dutching” entails pressing the chocolate after it has been ground to force out the cacao butter, which leaves behind a “cake” that can be processed into a fine powder; this powder is what we know as “cocoa.”\(^ {47}\) Dutching “improved the powder’s miscibility … in warm water, and it made the chocolate darker in color and milder in flavor.”\(^ {48}\) Thus, the process made the preparation of chocolate simpler. In addition, it made large-scale production of cheap chocolate possible.\(^ {49}\)

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\(^{42}\) Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 35.


\(^{44}\) Young, Allen M. *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao*. p. 36.


In 1847 another important milestone occurred when Joseph Storrs Fry discovered a method of mixing a blend of cocoa powder, sugar and melted cacao butter (rather than the normal warm water), which created a think paste that could be cast into a mold. Thus the “world’s first true eating chocolate” was born. Up until this point of time chocolate had been a beverage, but Fry’s innovation ushered in a time when solid chocolate began to gain popularity. While the beverage had lost its role as a status symbol, “the chocolate bar gained a new significance as a luxury in its own right.” This was due to the fact that the demand for solid chocolate caused an increased demand for cacao butter. Cacao butter’s price quickly increased, and so “it was cocoa powder which was within the reach of the masses, while solid chocolate – for awhile – was mainly for the elite.” As in the case with chocolate in its beverage form, however, solid chocolate went through a similar transformation from a luxury item to a common commodity as production increased with the growth of large companies such as Cadbury and Hershey to meet demand, and subsequently prices fell.

**Present Day Chocolate Consumption**

Today chocolate is a commonly consumed item especially in Europe and the United States. It is ubiquitous; there are many varieties of chocolate candies, desserts and beverages. It is widely available and relatively cheap, making chocolate accessible to most if not all consumers in these countries. Americans on average consume 12 pounds of chocolate per person per year; this is equivalent to around 126 Hershey Chocolate bars. As a nation that means we consume a total of 3.3 billion pounds of chocolate a year and spend about $13 billion a year on chocolate. Americans aren’t even the largest consumers of chocolate, that honor belongs to Switzerland where on average people consume 24 pounds of chocolate per person per year. Chocolate is not as widely consumed in Asian countries, but the amount consumed is slowly increasing. Since chocolate is now commonplace and relatively inexpensive in a majority of the world, it no longer serves as a status symbol, and many people today do not even realize chocolate’s importance in defining peoples place in society historically.

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Sources


