

Yom Yom Cacao!

A FAVORITE
MAYA DRINK
LIVES ON

BY ELIN DANIEL

One of the most important chocolate lovers who ever lived was, arguably, Carl von Linné, the 18th-century Swedish scientist who created the system of taxonomic classification still used to identify all living things by genus and species. If he had not succumbed to the pleasures of chocolate, would he have placed the species *cacao* in the most aptly named of all genera, *Theobroma*, “food of the gods”? He may not have known it, but Linné (or Linnaeus, the Latinized name by which he is frequently identified) was following in a long line of those who recognized the heavenly qualities of this tropical fruit.

The Maya word *cacao* comes from Mixe-Zoquean, the language believed to have been used by the Olmec, one of the earliest cultures of ancient Mesoamerica. This suggests that the Olmec, more than 3,000 years ago, had developed a taste for the zesty beverage made from the seeds of the cacao tree. In addition to linguistic evidence for the antiquity of cacao consumption, recent chemical analysis of residue found in spouted ceramic vessels from a Maya tomb at Colha, Belize, dating to 600 B.C., revealed traces of theobromine and caffeine, two of the major components of cacao. Similar vessels date to 900 B.C.

The discovery of iced chocolate may be traced to Motecuhzoma, emperor of the Aztecs (known in the United States as Montezuma), who liked nothing better than thick chocolate liquid poured over bowls of snow freshly brought from the nearby volcanic heights, then whipped into a chilled froth. Whether the beverage was served hot or cold, a good

head of foam was considered essential for a well-prepared chocolate drink and a sign of culinary artistry. The bride’s preparation and offer of a foamy chocolate drink to her groom was an intrinsic part of the marriage ritual in many regions of Mesoamerica.

Such a foamy concoction is known as *yom cacao* in Quiché and other highland Guatemala Maya languages. The foam was encouraged by pouring the chocolate liquid back and forth from one vessel to another until the desired frothy head was achieved. A well-known pre-Columbian vessel now in the Princeton Art Museum shows a comely Maya woman pouring liquid from one ceramic vase into another; the scene has been interpreted as illustrating this step in chocolate preparation. Unlike today’s sweet hot cocoa, chocolate beverages in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica were somewhat bitter and flavored with a variety of ingredients that included chili peppers and corn gruel as well as honey, flowers, and vanilla.



In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, the spider monkey was identified with licentiousness and sexual abandon, an apt symbol for these alabaster effigy vases, which would have held a frothy chocolate drink believed to have aphrodisiac qualities. The almond-shaped cacao seeds in the photograph have been fermented and roasted, and are ready to be ground into powder. LEFT: Esquintla, Guatemala. Maya. Ca. 1000-1500. H. 16.5 cm. #12681. RIGHT: Mexico. Aztec. 1325-1519. H. 13.5 cm. #NA6362.

The cacao tree will bear fruit only when grown in an atmosphere of high humidity, with rainfall of at least 1,500 to 2,000 mm (59 to 79 inches) annually, within a narrow geographic range of 20 degrees north and 20 degrees south of the equator. To ripen, the fruit requires temperatures that do not dip below 60 degrees Fahrenheit and the protection of surrounding larger trees to filter the sun’s rays. The tree grows 12 to 15 meters (39 to 49 feet) tall and bears fruit after about five years. It flowers directly from small cushions on its

trunk and major branches; the fruits are large, egg-shaped, ridged pods up to 14 inches long, each holding 30 to 40 almond-shaped seeds in a sweet mucilaginous pulp.

The seeds are fermented, dried, and roasted, then shelled to obtain the center kernel, or nib, which is ground into a coarse powder. The pulp of unripe cacao, within which the seeds nestle, has a consistency and taste similar to soursop or guanabana. This may have been the drink referred to as “tree-fresh cacao” by the Classic Maya, according to Mayanist Barbara McCloud. It is still consumed by Maya working in the cacao plantations and, McCloud avers, “If you love guanabanas, chirimoyas, custard apples, and the like, you’ll love this stuff.”

Hard to grow, prone to disease, tedious to prepare. Small wonder that the enjoyment of cacao was restricted to the Maya and Aztec elites. Aztec tribute lists show hundreds of loads of these valuable seeds coming in to the city of Tenochtitlan each year, each load containing 24,000 seeds. So valuable were they that the seeds were used as currency throughout Mesoamerica. One hundred seeds would buy a slave. For ten seeds, one could purchase a rabbit, or obtain the services of a prostitute. Counterfeit “coins” were created by filling empty cacao shells with clay or sand.

Once the Spaniards added sugar and cinnamon to an otherwise bitter brew, the popularity of this luxury drink spread throughout Europe. Chocolate houses were as prevalent as coffeehouses are today. New anecdotes enhanced its reputation. A French noblewoman attributed her robust health to daily cups of chocolate; a Spanish lady took revenge on her faithless lover by offering him poison, masking the taste in a cup of cocoa. The church thundered against this decadent drink, eventually issuing, to no avail, a papal bull prohibiting the drinking of chocolate. Its role in the pursuit of love is well entrenched in popular folklore. The aphrodisiacal properties of chocolate were accepted by both the Aztecs and the Europeans. Scientific analysis confirms this quality with the recognition that serotonin, one of chocolate’s components, encourages a sense of well-being.

The uses of chocolate are many and varied. In highland Guatemala, where ancient traditions still flourish, the cure for a toothache calls for a cacao flower to be placed on and in a painful cavity. In Chichicastenango, the cure for a cold involves drinking a cup of hot cocoa and rubbing cocoa butter (the white, waxy fat extracted from the nib during the grinding process) on the chest to cool it and ease the lungs. Cocoa butter has been used as a nutritious substitute for cod liver oil, and the Maya of Guatemala use it as a food supplement during the last days of pregnancy. It’s also an ingredient in many modern commercial suntan lotions and wrinkle creams. Throughout Mesoamerica, chocolate’s history as a folk remedy runs the gamut from use as a diuretic to a



HOT CHOCOLATE

This is a modern approximation of the ancient chocolate beverage. It should be made with Mexican chocolate (brands include Ibarra, Abuelita, and Morelia, among others). Mexican chocolate is darker than its American counterpart and frequently contains ground almonds or pine nuts and cinnamon. What follows is a basic recipe that should be adjusted to individual tastes.

FOR EACH GUEST:

Into a deep pot, break 1 tablet Mexican chocolate. Add 1 cup water (use milk if you must, but the more traditional ingredient is water).


Heat the water to boiling, stirring the chocolate until it melts. The result will be somewhat grittier than other chocolate drinks. Add, to taste, cinnamon, a vanilla bean, and a small piece of chili (yes, chili!). If you want to add further authenticity, stir in a teaspoonful or more of masa, the corn meal used to make tortillas. Using a whisk, or wooden *molinillo*, whisk the chocolate until a thick froth forms. Or cheat and use an electric blender or portable electric mixer. Pour and enjoy! To have chocolate the way Motecuhzoma liked it, pour the concoction over a glass of shaved ice.

Drawing of a detail from the Princeton Vase (ca. A.D. 750), showing a woman pouring liquid from one vessel into another. This is usually interpreted as raising the froth for a well-prepared drink of cacao. No doubt, maize and chili had already been added.



cure for childbirth fever, from easing coughs to healing wounds and eliminating parasites. It is said to ease depression, counter the effects of snakebite, and alleviate asthma attacks. To a choco-holic, however, it encompasses all of the basic food groups. This truism was noted in a recent cyberspace paean:

*Chocolate is a vegetable.
 Chocolate is derived from cocoa beans.
 Bean = vegetable.
 Sugar is derived from either sugar cane or sugar beets.
 Both of them are plants, in the vegetable category.
 Thus, chocolate is a vegetable.
 To go one step further, chocolate candy bars also contain milk,
 which is dairy.
 So candy bars are a health food.
 Chocolate-covered raisins, cherries, orange slices and strawberries
 All count as fruit, so eat as many as you want.*

Truly, food of the gods. Linné would be proud. 

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and is the author of Guide to the Mesoamerican Gallery. As the Museum's first public programs coordinator, she originated and for many years organized the Museum's renowned annual Maya Weekend. Danién is currently working on a biography of Robert Burkitt, an archaeologist famous in Guatemalan circles as the man who came to tea and stayed for 30 years.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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