

Chocolate

JANET HARDY-GOULD

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CHOCOLATE

Chocolate has many stories. You can start with Moctezuma the Second, who had a 'bank' full of millions of cacao beans – enough to make 25 million chocolate bars. Or with Daniel Peter, who wanted to make something new from chocolate, and tried mixing it with cheese. There are the great names of chocolate – like Fry, Hershey, and Cadbury, who made homes, schools, and gardens for their workers as well as factories.

And there are dark stories too – stories of the slaves who made the terrible journey across the Atlantic to work on the cacao tree plantations. And the children in West Africa who have to work on plantations there to get food to eat and who cannot go to school. Do they pick the beans that make *your* chocolate?

But the biggest story is the world's love for chocolate. And when you start to read it, you just have to have a little bit more . . .

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
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First published in 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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ISBN: 978 0 19 478730 7

A complete recording of Chocolate is available on CD. Pack ISBN: 978 0 19 478729 1

Printed in China

Word count (main text): 6,591

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Map: p.3 by Peter Bull

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1 The world of chocolate

Most people love the taste of chocolate. Some enjoy sweet milk chocolate and others prefer strong dark chocolate. But most chocolate lovers agree – there is no other food like it. It has a wonderful rich taste which stays in your mouth. Did you know that chocolate has more than 300 different flavours in it? It is no surprise that chocolate is now more and more popular in countries all around the world.

But what is chocolate and where did it first come from? Chocolate is made from the beans of the cacao tree. These trees first grew in the rainforests of Central and South America and people began to use the beans a very long time ago. The tree has large fruits called pods and these hold the beans inside. The scientific name for the cacao tree, *Theobroma cacao*, tells us about the wonderful food that comes from it. *Theobroma* means ‘food of the gods’.

People now grow cacao trees in more than twenty different countries and not just in Central or South America. The trees need hot weather and you can find them in Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Ivory Coast in Africa too. Farmers grow around 4 million tonnes of cacao beans a year and more than a third of this comes from the Ivory Coast.

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Who eats the most chocolate in the world today? It is the people of Switzerland, who have 12.3 kilograms each every year! The Germans come next at 11.1 kilograms each, then the Belgians at 11 kilograms each, and the British at 10.2 kilograms each.

You can eat or drink chocolate in many different ways. There are big boxes of chocolates of different flavours, little chocolate bars that go in your bag or pocket, wonderful biscuits and large birthday cakes. In the summer you can eat chocolate ice cream, or on a cold winter's night you can drink hot chocolate to keep you warm.

Chocolate has also been important in books and films. Perhaps the most famous book is *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. It is the story of a poor boy who wins a visit to a wonderful chocolate factory. The factory belongs to the strange and exciting sweet-maker Willy Wonka. The book became two films, and in the second film Johnny Depp plays the clever but dangerous Mr Wonka. But this is not the only book about chocolate to become a film. There is *Like Water for Chocolate* from the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel, and *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris, which also became a film with Johnny Depp.

We can see that chocolate is in our stories, films and books today. But when did the story of chocolate itself really begin? We need to look back thousands of years ago for the answer.

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2 The first chocolate

The first people who used the pods of the cacao tree were perhaps the Olmecs three thousand years ago. The Olmecs lived deep in the rainforest in the country that is now called Mexico. People think that the Olmecs broke open the large pods of the tree to find food. But they did not use the cacao beans, they only ate the sweet white pulp around the beans. In Brazil and other places in South America people still make a drink from this soft pulp.

Since the 1970s people have also asked questions about the word 'cacao'. Where did it first come from and who used it? They have found the word 'kakawa' in the old Olmec language and they now think that 'cacao' came from there.

The earliest examples of chocolate from cacao beans come from the Maya people 1,500 years ago. These clever people lived near the same places as the Olmecs and had fine buildings and beautiful books. They were the first people to grow cacao trees and make food from the beans. We know from their pictures that chocolate was very important to them. On special days, they gave chocolate to their gods.

The Maya made a strong chocolate drink from the beans. First they took them to a warm, dark place. Then they put them in the sun to dry and later they cooked them. Next they ground them to make paste. When the paste

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was hard and dry they put it into water. They poured the water between two cups, from one to the other and back again, for a long time. This made a special drink with a lot of bubbles, and the Maya loved it.

They did not have sugar so they put spices in their drink for a nicer taste. At first everybody drank the chocolate, but in later times only very rich families could have it.

The Maya used special cups to drink their chocolate and people have found interesting examples of these. One cup has picture-writing for the word 'cacao' on it and there is still some chocolate inside after 1,500 years!

From around AD 1200 the Aztec people started to become more important than the Maya and they ruled over a large number of men and women. The centre of the Aztec world was the city of Tenochtitlán – today's Mexico City. Cacao trees did not grow well here because it was too dry. So the Aztecs, who loved chocolate like the Maya, began to buy cacao beans from them. In the end, these beans were very important and they became a type of money.



A Maya pot, showing a present of white cacao beans

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Pouring chocolate

Like the Maya, the Aztecs made cacao beans into a drink. They called it *chocolatl* which gave us the word 'chocolate'. They too put different spices in it and they liked it best with a very strong flavour. The Aztecs drank a lot of *chocolatl* and people said that the last Aztec ruler, Moctezuma the Second (1466–1520), had fifty cups of chocolate a day!

Moctezuma the Second was a very rich man and he was famous for his large 'bank' – but it was full of cacao beans, not money. One Spanish writer said that Moctezuma had 960 million beans in his bank. Today we can make around 25 million chocolate bars from that number of beans!

Moctezuma the Second



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