

Taking it further 2

The history of cocoa and chocolate

Where the cocoa story begins

The story begins in the rainforests of Central America and the Amazon basin, where cocoa trees originally grew. As long ago as 600 AD, the Maya Indians of Central America were making a chocolate drink by roasting the cocoa beans and adding water and spices. They valued this drink so highly that they cleared land and grew more cocoa trees, to increase the supply. And so they became the first cocoa farmers. They also used the precious beans as a form of money.

On to the Aztecs

In time, Maya traders brought cocoa beans northwards to the land of the Aztecs, in what is now Mexico. The Aztec nobility loved the chocolate drink. It was described as 'finely ground, soft, foamy, reddish, bitter with chilli water, aromatic flowers, vanilla and wild bee honey'.

But the Aztecs themselves could not grow cocoa, because their region was too dry. They relied on obtaining the beans by trade and, as their empire spread southwards, by demanding them as taxes.

The Spanish arrive

In 1517, a Spanish fleet, led by the adventurer Don Cortes, landed on the coast of Mexico. Don Cortes made his way to the city of Tenochtitlan (where Mexico City now stands) to meet Montezuma, the Emperor of the Aztecs. At court, Don Cortes was introduced to the chocolate drink, sipped from golden goblets with golden spoons.

In 1520, three years later, the Spanish attacked the Aztecs, bringing an end to the Aztec civilization. Cortes was made Governor and Captain General of Mexico.

Cocoa reaches Spain

When Don Cortes returned to Spain in 1528 he brought back cocoa beans. Soon the chocolate drink became fashionable among wealthy Spaniards. They mixed the beans with sugar, vanilla, nutmeg, cinnamon, and other spices.

At first the beans were in short supply. But by 1585, large quantities of cocoa beans were being shipped to Spain.

The chocolate drink spreads across Europe

Use of the chocolate drink spread gradually across Europe, with Spain largely in control of the cocoa bean supply.

- By 1606 the chocolate drink was established in Italy, thanks to an Italian traveler, who had visited Central America and watched Indians preparing it.
- In 1615 it reached France, when a Spanish princess married King Louis XIII of France.
- In 1634, the Dutch captured the Spanish trading island of Curacao in the Caribbean, where they were able to intercept shipments of cocoa.
- The fashion for chocolate drinks finally reached England from France in the 1650s, when they became popular at the court of King Charles II. Soon chocolate houses opened, where fashionable people could meet their friends, to talk business and politics and exchange gossip, over chocolate drinks.

Cocoa farming spreads

As the popularity of the chocolate drink grew, more European countries wanted a share of the cocoa trade. They gained some through warfare, by wresting cocoa-growing territories from Spanish control. Cocoa farms were also set up in the West Indies, the Far East and Africa.

It was around 1827, that Tetteh Quashie is said to have smuggled his cocoa beans from the Spanish-controlled island of Fernando Po (now called Bioko, and part of Equatorial Guinea), and planted them in Mampong in Ghana.

The chocolate drink business

At first, only the wealthy could afford drinking chocolate, because governments taxed cocoa imports heavily. But over time, taxes were reduced and chocolate became more widely available. It was believed to have medicinal properties. So some of the earliest makers of the chocolate drink were apothecaries (chemists). Others became involved through the grocery trade. For example John Cadbury, who started the Cadbury company, began selling it alongside tea and coffee, in his Birmingham shop, in 1831.

Chocolate goes solid

For centuries, chocolate was available only as a drink. It was quite a fatty drink, because of the natural fat in the cocoa bean. Ingredients like sago flour were added to counteract the fat.

But the invention of a cocoa press in Holland in 1828 changed everything. Using this press, much of the fat could be squeezed out of the roasted cocoa beans, as cocoa butter. The 'cake' left behind could then be ground into cocoa powder, and used for drinks that tasted better than before.

At first, the improved cocoa powder was used only for drinks. Then it was discovered that if you heated some cocoa butter with the cocoa powder and other ingredients, you got a chocolate that hardened as it cooled – but would melt again in your mouth. And so the chocolate bar was born. The first were sold in 1847 by Fry & Sons of Bristol. (Fry merged with Cadbury in 1919.)

The Cadbury company made its first chocolate bar in 1897, using milk powder, cocoa powder, cocoa butter and sugar. The company kept on experimenting, and by 1905 it had developed an even better tasting bar, using fresh milk instead of milk powder. It was called Cadbury Dairy Milk, and it became a bestseller. Today, over 100 years later, it is still one of the UK's leading brands of chocolate bar.

Cocoa and chocolate today

Today, cocoa is grown in over forty countries, within the tropics, with the hot damp climate it needs. But the bulk comes from West Africa. The top two producers are the Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. Between them, these grow over 50% of the world's total.

Meanwhile, the market for chocolate keeps growing. As countries develop, they tend to consume more chocolate!

Things to do

- Find out more about the Maya Indians.
- Find out more about the Aztec civilization, and its fall to the Spanish invaders.
- Draw a timeline for the story of cocoa and chocolate, using the dates given in the text. When you get to the present, you can add what you know about chocolate brands on sale today, from your own experience.
- Find out about the history of Cadbury, which had its beginnings in John Cadbury's grocery shop in Birmingham, in the UK.