

SANDALWOOD HIGH SCHOOL

Sr. ALFONSO

Reading Episode #2: Chocolate, A History

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Read the article below and apply the following: marking the text, selective highlighting, annotations.

CHOCOLATE'S HISTORY IS A SWEET MESOAMERICAN STORY

On a sunny morning in San Francisco, men and women scoot around a tiny chocolate factory, wrapping bars, checking temperatures and sorting cacao beans. This is the home of Dandelion Chocolate, a small chocolate maker founded in 2010. The tools and flavors have changed, but the work of turning cacao beans into chocolate is a practice that goes back to early Mesoamerican civilizations.



The Olmecs of southern Mexico were an ancient people who lived near the Aztec and Maya civilizations. The Olmecs were probably the first to ferment, roast, and grind cacao beans for drinks and gruels, possibly as early as 1500 B.C., says Hayes Lavis, a cultural arts curator for the Smithsonian. Pots and vessels uncovered from this ancient civilization show traces of cacao.

"When you think of chocolate, most people don't think of Mesoamerica," says Lavis. "There's so much rich history that we're just beginning to understand."

In their raw state, cacao seeds are bitter and unrecognizable as chocolate. "How would you think to take the seed, harvest it, dry it, let it ferment and roast it?" Lavis said. One theory states that someone was eating the fruit and spitting seeds into the fire and the rich smell of them roasting inspired the thought that "maybe there's something more we could do with this."

The naturally bitter flavor of cacao came through at full strength in early Maya recipes. "This was before they had really good roasting techniques," says Dandelion co-founder Todd Masonis.

"Rarely did they add any sweetener," says anthropologist Joel Palka, of the University of Illinois at Chicago. A variety of herbs were on hand, however, for seasoning cacao-based food and drink ranging from chili and vanilla to magnolia.

A CULTURAL TOUCHSTONE

Cacao figured into pre-modern Maya society as a sacred food, sign of prestige, social centerpiece and cultural touchstone. "You would have to get together to prepare the chocolate," Palka said. "It's the whole social process." Around Chiapas, Mexico, Palka encounters people who still grow chocolate as a family tradition and cultural practice. "It's not only something that's good, but part of their identity," he says. Cacao drinks in Mesoamerica became associated with high rank and special occasions. These might include initiations for young

men or celebrations marking the end of the Maya calendar year. After the Olmecs, the Maya of Guatemala, Yucatan and the surrounding region incorporated cacao seed into religious life.

Paintings recovered from the time show cacao in mythological scenes and even court proceedings. "It's one of the few food crops that was used as a dowry or part of [wedding] ceremonies," Lavis said. Early records of Maya marriages in Guatemala indicate that in some places, "a woman would have to make the cacao and prove that she could make it with the proper froth." Around Chiapas, Palka said, residents prepared chocolate drinks as offerings for gods as recently as 1980. "It was something that people enjoyed," he said, "and so they knew their gods enjoyed it, too." Cacao beans were also used as currency, and the seeds were so valuable they were even counterfeited. Researchers have come across "cacao beans" that were actually made of clay. The clay beans may have been passed off as money or substituted for real cacao in ceremonies. Aztec rulers accepted cacao as tribute payments, and it was commonly exchanged in Maya marriage negotiations.

USE OF CACAO: A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Archaeologist Eleanor Harrison-Buck, however, cautions against thinking of cacao's importance to its economic value as a form of elite power and control. Rather, she said, using cacao as a resource for the ancient Maya was grounded in social relations. "I think that chocolate became so important because it's harder to grow," compared to plants like maize and cactus. "You can't grow cacao in every region in the Americas," Palka says. "It requires a certain kind of soil, amount of rainfall and especially shade, because the ... little flies that pollinate the cacao trees have to live in shade." As a result, cacao requires an area of limited sun and plenty of humidity. Art recovered from the Belize River town of Lucu shows cacao as a staple in ancient Maya feasts. The fact that cacao was a key cultivated plant and served in so many ceremonies makes it important to study and understand the region, according to Harrison-Buck. But the fossilized plant tissue of this important crop do not preserve well, she says. As a result, archaeologists know more about the early uses of cacao than they do about ancient methods of producing the bean.

LOOKING FOR CACAO'S BIOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

To better understand how ancient civilizations produced cacao, Harrison-Buck and soil scientist Serita Frey have been working in Belize to find out whether cacao orchards leave a distinctive biological footprint. They have collected soil in areas where cacao is currently grown in eastern Belize and begun analyzing it. They've also sampled soil from floodplains adjacent to ancient Maya sites, and from lands that supported cacao in colonial times.

By comparing chemicals in soil from these various sites, they're hoping to map out the molecular signposts that indicate ancient cacao cultivation. Chocolate is often said to have been seen as an ancient medicine and aphrodisiac. Cortez wrote to King Carlos I of Spain of "xocoatl," a drink that "builds up resistance and fights fatigue." And one officer serving Cortez reportedly observed the Aztec ruler Montezuma drinking more than 50 cups per day of a frothy chocolate beverage. But according to Lavis, some of these tales are likely overstated: "I don't think any living person could drink 50 cups of cacao," he said. The Spanish also probably attributed medical benefits to chocolate that the Maya didn't—instead, cacao was simply part of Maya life. "I think it was just part of their diet," Lavis said "and they knew it was good for them."

Quiz

1 Which of the following sentences from the article show that the Maya viewed cacao as more than just a healthy food?

- (A) Special occasions might include initiation rites for young men or celebrations marking the end of the Maya calendar year.
- (B) "It's one of the few food crops that was used as a dowry or part of [wedding] ceremonies," Lavis said.
- (C) "I think that chocolate became so important because it's harder to grow," compared to plants like maize and cactus, which were used to brew early versions of beer and tequila, respectively.
- (D) And art recovered from the Maya Lowlands shows cacao as a staple in ancient Maya feasts.

2 Read the following selection from the article.

Around Chiapas, Palka said, residents prepared chocolate drinks as offerings for gods related to nature as recently as 1980. "It was something that people enjoyed," he said, "and so they knew their gods enjoyed it, too."

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selection above?

- (A) Modern residents of Chiapas still value cacao because it is part of their cultural heritage.
- (B) Today, residents of Chiapas practice ancient religions in secret.
- (C) Residents of Chiapas are growing and using cacao illegally, but this is largely ignored by society.
- (D) The residents of Chiapas want to bring back ancient traditions and religious practices.

3 What are the two central ideas of the article?

- (A) Cacao is hard to grow because it requires a certain climate, and that is why it has great value to many people.
- (B) Cacao is not delicious on its own, and it must be carefully processed to become delicious chocolate.
- (C) Cacao was very valuable to ancient Mayans, and it still has value to modern people who value it as part of their cultural heritage.
- (D) Cacao was important to the ancient Mayans, and its importance died out over the centuries, leaving cultures to learn about their history.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the section "A Cultural Touchstone."

Cacao beans were also used as currency, and the seeds were so valuable they were even counterfeited. Researchers have come across "cacao beans" that were actually made of clay. The clay beans may have been passed off as money or substituted for real cacao in ceremonies. Aztec rulers accepted cacao as tribute payments, and it was commonly exchanged in Maya marriage negotiations.

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

- (A) Cacao beans were not used for food but rather as a form of money before coins were made.
- (B) Cacao and clay used to taste very similar until ancient people learned how to roast cacao beans.
- (C) Ancient Mayan and Aztec civilization was full of crime.
- (D) The cacao plant was one of the most valuable resources to the ancient Maya and Aztecs.

- 2 Which idea is BEST supported by the section "Use Of Cacao A Social Phenomenon"?

- (A) Cacao is still very important economically because it is challenging to grow.
- (B) Researchers need to find well-preserved cacao fossils to understand how it was consumed.
- (C) The kind of terrain required to grow cacao makes it very tough to study its history.
- (D) Cacao was precious because it was hard to grow, and it was included at every important Mayan event.

- 3 Which option provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?

- (A) Cacao can be used as money, but it is easily counterfeited so it is not a secure form of money for a society to use.
- (B) Cacao was incredibly valuable to the people of Mesoamerica, and understanding how and why they used it can help us to understand their culture.
- (C) Cacao is difficult to grow, and when the people of Mesoamerica learned how to harvest it, they used it in all social events.
- (D) Cacao is only just now being studied, and modern society is learning how cacao has various uses and great value.

4 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops the idea that cacao was incredibly important to the Maya?

- (A) Cacao figured into pre-modern Maya society as a sacred food, sign of prestige, social centerpiece and cultural touchstone.
- (B) Cacao drinks in Mesoamerica became associated with high rank and special occasions.
- (C) Researchers have come across "cacao beans" that were actually made of clay.
- (D) "I think that chocolate became so important because it's harder to grow," compared to plants like maize and cactus.