

Chocolate:

A Short and Sweet History

We normally think of chocolate as a sweet treat, but it began as a bitter beverage! Chocolate as a food got its start in ancient times, when it wasn't just a dessert – it played an important part in ritual and culture.

In ancient Latin America, chocolate was worshipped – literally! Both the Mayan and Aztec people had gods that they believed were responsible for bringing chocolate to the earth. The two cultures consumed chocolate as a drink, which was popular among nobility. It was believed that the cocoa bean had magical powers, and it was used during major life events like births, marriages and deaths.

Chocolate wasn't mixed with sugar until Europeans came in contact with the Americas in the 1500s. They brought it home to Europe, where it became an expensive import and a symbol of wealth. Instead of chili and corn, Europeans added cinnamon and sugar to chocolate. But because chocolate was imported from another country, chocolate was available only to the upper class and became a symbol of wealth and status.

In the mid-1600s, "chocolate houses," which were like the coffee houses we have today, were a trendy meeting place for English citizens. By the 1700s, chocolate was a part of life for upper-class citizens in Europe; believed to be a nutritious drink with many health benefits. Back in America, chocolate was so popular that it was included in the rations for soldiers on the battlefield in the Revolutionary War.

In the early 1800s, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and people quickly found ways of speeding up the chocolate-making process. In 1828, a Dutch chemist found a way to remove some of the natural fat from chocolate, which led to the creation of chocolate in food form. The first chocolate bar was made in 1847, and by 1868, a company called Cadbury began selling chocolate candies. The same year, Nestle invented milk chocolate.

QUESTIONS

1. Which cultures were the first to consume chocolate?

- a. The Swiss and the Dutch
- b. The Mayans and Aztecs
- c. The English and the Mayans

2. How did chocolate become popular in Europe?

- a. People discovered it grew naturally there
- b. Explorers brought it back from the Americas
- c. A famous actor drank it

3. For most of its history, chocolate was mainly eaten by:

- a. Everyone
- b. Peasants
- c. The upper classes

4. Why was chocolate so expensive in Europe?

- a. It was so delicious!
- b. It took a long time to make
- c. It was imported from another country

1. b 2. b 3. c 4. c

Make it like the Mayans!

Here's a quick recipe for making a chocolate drink similar to what Mayan and Aztec people might have consumed.

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Cocoa beans (or unsweetened cocoa powder if you want to save time)
- Cornmeal
- Chili powder
- Vanilla

WHAT YOU DO:

- Grind the cocoa beans to a powder (you can also buy)
- Mix with cold water and slowly add in cornmeal. Stir it until a froth forms.
- Add the chili powder and vanilla to taste.

Different cultures would customize their chocolate drinks with local foods and ingredients. What foods that grow in your area would taste good in hot chocolate?



Mayan pottery painting of a woman grinding cacao beans.

Painting of a Spanish "chocolate party."

