

Chocolate

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“Chocolate isn’t period!”

Chocolate in its modern forms—a highly sweetened bar of candy or ingredient in cakes and cookies—is not historically accurate for much of Europe during the majority of the scope of SCA time (c. 600-1600 CE). However, a chocolate drink created by the combination of ground roasted cacao beans, sweetened with sugar and flavored with spices, was popular among the royalty and nobility of Spain in the late 16th century. This beverage, based on the *xocholatl* consumed by the Aztecs, was transported from the Americas to Spain by early conquistadors and settlers, and eventually spread to the rest of Europe. By the mid-seventeenth century, this MesoAmerican concoction was a common item in homes across Europe and the Americas.

Aztec Chocolate

Fernandez de Oviedo, a member of Cortes’ expedition, wrote extensively of the use of chocolate in Aztec society. He reported that cacao beans and cacao products were used for religious rituals, as currency, as a beverage for the wealthy, a drug, an aphrodisiac, and as a portable food source (de Lempis 385). A paste made from ground cacao beans was combined with different additives such as “chili pepper, *achiote*, corn, fruit, even hallucinogenic mushrooms” (de Lempis 384).

Despite some regional differences in the specific preparations of chocolate, the concoction was common to every part of the Aztec Empire. As Marcy Norton explains:

From Nicaragua to northwest Mexico, there was a fundamental sameness among the modes of consumption, ritual contexts, and symbolic resonances of chocolate. Everywhere, the prevailing cacao concoction was consumed as a beverage, sometimes hot and sometimes cold, mixed with maize or not, and often sweetened with honey and spiced with chili peppers, vanilla, and other fragrant flora. The starting point for all of them was the same. Cacao nibs—what are commonly called “beans,” or the seeds inside the pulpy mass of the cacao fruit—were dried and fermented to increase their “oily and buttery” qualities. They were then toasted until the nibs turned from brown to black and sloughed off their husks, and finally they were ground between two stones (one of which had a fire burning beneath) known as a *metate*. (A similar process still characterizes chocolate production.) The paste that resulted was perishable and would spoil within a week. If formed into hardened tablets, however, it would last for up to two years. The final beverage was made by dissolving the cacao paste in water and mixing in diverse additions (maize, spices, honey) (671).

Spain and the New World

In 1502, Christopher Columbus and his men captured a Mayan canoe at Guanaja Island near Honduras; the cargo included several pounds of cacao beans, which Columbus later described as the “‘nuts’ which were used as money in New Spain” (Jamieson 271). Seventeen years later, as Cortes launched what would become the conquest of the Aztec Empire, he and his men encountered chocolate for the first time; however, the early impressions noted by explorers and missionary priests were overwhelmingly negative. Girolamo Benzoni, a Milanese adventurer in Nicaragua, found the drink spicy, bitter, and thought it “seemed more a drink for pigs, than a drink for humanity” (Norton 668). Likewise, the Jesuit priest Jose de Acosta insisted that anyone who was not accustomed to the drink “could not have a taste for it,” and “compared the foamy froth that capped the drink to feces” (Norton 668).

Despite the beverage’s poor initial reception, frequent contact with chocolate throughout the Spanish-held territories led to an increased tolerance for and interest in consuming it. Mission priests were often paid in cacao beans, a Spanish *encomendero* (the conquistador-turned-Spanish lord who received tribute from Indians) ordered his

subjects to prepare a thousand pounds of “ground cacao ready to drink” for his voyage to Spain in 1531, and retinue of Indians brought Prince Philip (the future Philip II) a gift of chocolate in 1544 (Norton 679). Chocolate trickled into Spain, primarily a novelty or luxury item for the royalty and nobility, until late in the 16th century. It was not established in Seville until the early 17th century; however, it was listed in tax records as a regular trade item in the 1590s, indicating that there was a regular and somewhat steady influx of chocolate onto the Iberian Peninsula (Norton 679). The first Spanish work about chocolate was printed in 1624; it is from this work that the recipe I have used is taken.

Evolution of Chocolate

Although the drink that the Spanish first encountered tended to be bitter and spicy, importation to Europe and adoption of the drink—for it was almost universally consumed as a drink until the early 19th century-- by Spanish and other European consumers altered the composition significantly. Imitating the Aztec and Mayan habit of sweetening their chocolate with honey, the Spanish added sugar from their vast plantations in Valencia and the Caribbean (Norton 684). The Spanish also “substituted familiar spices—cinnamon, black pepper, anise, rose, and sesame, among others—in place of the native flower spice complex, *achiote*, and chili peppers” (Norton 684).

The Recipe

To every 100 *Cacaos*, you must put two cods of the long red Pepper, of which I have spoken before, and are called, in the Indian Tongue, *Chilparlagua*; and in stead of those of the Indies, you may take those of Spaine; which are broadest, and least hot. One handfull of Annis-seed *Orejuelas*, which are otherwise called *Vinacaxlidos*: and two of the flowers, called *Mechasuehil*, if the Belly be bound. But in stead of this, in Spaine, we put in sixe Roses of Alexandria beat to Powder: One Cod of Campeche, or Logwood: Two Drams of Cinamon, Almons, and Hasle-Nuts, of each one Dozen: Of white Sugar, halfe a pound: Of *Achiote*, enough to give it the colour. And if you cannot have those things, which come from the Indies, you may make it with the rest.

The *Cacao*, and the other Ingredients must be beaten in a Morter of Stone, or ground upon a broad stone, which the *Indians* call *Metate*, and is onely made for that use: But the first thing that is to be done, is to dry the Ingredients, all except the *Achiote*; with care that they may be beaten to powder, keeping them still in stirring, that they be not burnt, or become blacke; and if they be over-dried, they will be bitter, and lose their vertue. The Cinamon, and the long red Pepper are to be first beaten, with the Annis-seed; and then beate the *Cacao*, which you must beate by a little and little, till it be all powdred; and sometimes turn it round in the beating, that it may mixe the better: And every one of these Ingredients, must be beaten by it selfe; and then put all the Ingredients into the Vessell, where the *Cacao* is; which you must stirre together with a spoone, and then take out that Paste, and put it into the Morter, under which you must lay a little fire, after the *Confection* is made. But you must be very carefull, not to put more fire, than will warme it, that the unctuous part does not dry away. And you must also take care, to put in the *Achiote* in the beating; that it may the better take the colour. You must Searse all the Ingredients, but onely the *Cacao*; and if you take the shell from the *Cacao*, it is the better; and when you shall find it to be well beaten, and incorporated (which you shall know by the shortnesse of it) then with a spoone take up some of the Paste, which will be almost liquid; and so either make it into Tablets; or put it into Boxes, and when it is cold it will be hard. To make the Tablets, you must put a spoonefull of the paste upon a piece of paper, the *Indians* put it upon the leaf of a *Planten-tree*; where, being put into the shade, it growes hard; and then bowing the paper, the Tablet falls off, by reason of the fatnesse of the paste. But if you put it into any thing of earth, or wood, it sticks fast, and will nor come off, but with scraping, or breaking.

There is another way to drinke *Chocolate*, which is cold; and it takes its name from the principall Ingredient, and is called *Cacao*; which they use at feasts, to refresh themselves; and it is made after this manner. The *Chocolate* being dissolved in water with the *Molinet*, take off the scumme, or crassy part, which riseth in greater quantity, when the *Cacao* is older, and more putrified. The scumme is laid aside by it selfe in a little dish; and then put sugar into that part, from whence you took the scumme; and powre it from on high into the scumme; and so drinke it cold.

- Antonio Colmenero, tran. Don Diego de Vades-forte. "A Curious Treatise of the Nature and Quality of Chocolate." Published in London in 1640, in Spain before 1631.

Translation of Original Recipe

Aztec recipe:

100 cacao beans
2 cods long red pepper
Handful of anise-seed
2 *mecaxo'chitl* flowers

Spanish recipe:

100 cacao beans
2 cods long red pepper or Spanish peppers
6 roses of Alexandria, powdered
1 cod Campeche
2 drams cinnamon
12 almonds

12 hazelnuts
.5 lb. white sugar
Achiote for color

Grind the cacao beans in a mortar until ground and set it aside in another vessel. Dry all other ingredients except the *achiote* until they are dried but not burnt. Grind all the ingredients individually and separately until they are a fine powder, turning the mortar at intervals. When these are powdered, then mix these together in the vessel with the ground cacao beans. Stir them together with a spoon, and place into the mortar. Heat the mortar gently and mix the ingredients together. When the mix is well-combined and nearly liquid, take it up with a spoon and make it into tablets, or put it into boxes.

To make tablets, put a spoonful of the paste onto a piece of paper and let it harden.

The Redaction

Aztec recipe, adjusted

100 cacao beans
3 tsp. dried cayenne pepper
Small handful of anise seeds (substitute for *mecaxo'chitl* flowers)
1 tsp. black pepper (substitute for *xochinacaztli*)
1 tsp. vanilla (additional substitute for *xochinacaztli*)
6 tablespoons honey

Spanish recipe, adjusted

100 cacao beans
3 tsp. dried cayenne pepper
2 tsp. cinnamon
Small handful of anise seeds
1 tsp vanilla
1 tsp black pepper
12 almonds
.5 lb white sugar (about 1 cup)
Achiote to color (about 2 tbsp)

I chose to make one batch of chocolate; one following as closely as possible the adapted Spanish recipe. I purchased two pounds of raw organic Mexican cacao beans, a pound of raw organic Spanish almonds, and a backup pound of roasted organic cocoa nibs.

I roasted the cacao beans, 100 at a time, on a cookie sheet in a 300 degree oven for 20 minutes per batch (this is the temperature and roasting duration recommended by the retailer). After a 20 minute roast and 10 minutes of cooling time, the hulls of the beans split open and were easily removed. I hulled the beans and discarded any that had burned or that did not split.

I repeated the process with the almonds, although the skins of the almonds remained intact after roasting and cooling.

In the interests of time, I used a food chopper to mince each ingredient, and used a coffee grinder to grind each ingredient to a fine powder. As indicated in the original recipe, I ground each ingredient separate from all the others and then combined them in one bowl. I also ground the roasted almonds to a fine meal.

In a medium pot, I heated the mixture over low heat until the ingredients melted and became a thick semi-liquid paste, about the consistency of unset fudge. Each batch ultimately melted at a different rate and temperature, which indicates that close observation is necessary when preparing the chocolate.

I altered my initial redaction to include more ingredients. I believe that I misread Colmenero's notation that ". . . in stead of this [*mecaxo'chitl* flowers], in Spaine, we put in sixe Roses of Alexandria beat to Powder. . . ." At first reading, it seemed that Colmenero intended to omit all ingredients after the flowers; however, several more readings led me to believe that the only ingredient from the original Aztec recipe to be omitted was the flowers; these were to be substituted with Rose of Alexandria.

I poured the mixture onto a sheet lined with parchment paper and let it set until cold. The resulting slab was then broken into pieces and packed into a box.

Appendix of Additives

Achiote: (Engl. annatto, Lat. *Bixa orellana*) used to tint the chocolate beverage red; the seeds “imparted a slightly musky flavor (sometimes compared to paprika and saffron)” (Norton 672).

Anise: (*Pimpinella anisum*)

Black pepper: (*Piper nigrum*)

Campeche: (Engl. Logwood, Lat. *Haematoxylum campechianum*) A tree in the legume family, native to Central America, used for stains in textiles and paper. Logwood was probably included in the recipe to provide the reddish color previously created by the addition of *achiote*.

Cinnamon: (*Cinnamomum verum*)

“Dried ground flowers”:

1. *xochinacaztli* (also known as *gueynacaztle*), probably *Cymbopetalum penduliflorum*, a tree of the custard-apple family that grows in Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas. Norton describes the taste as “akin to that of black pepper with “a hint of resinous bitterness,” and compared to nutmeg, allspice, and cinnamon” (Norton 672).
2. *mexaco´chitl* (probably *Piper sanctum* and related to black pepper) with a spicy, floral edge reminiscent of anise (Norton 672).
3. *tlixochitl* (*Vanilla planifolia*). This flower spice constellation had an ancient lineage, in evidence in Mayan cosmological and sacred texts of the Popul Vuh (Norton 672)

“*Long red pepper*”: Probably a type of chili pepper rather than the Indonesian long pepper (*Piper longum*) that was common in Europe during the 16th century. Given Colmenero’s description of the item and the types of chili native to Central America, cayenne pepper (*Capsicum annuum*) seems mostly likely.

Sugar: In the first half of the 15th century, the Valencia region of Spain was widely known for its sugar refineries; the region exported sugar to the rest of Europe as well as providing the sweetener to wealthy Spanish patrons (de Lempis 384). The Portuguese introduced sugar cane from Sicily to the island of Madeira during the same period; eventually, the demand for Portuguese sugar outstripped the production abilities of both Madeira and Valencia, so new areas were sought for cultivation. This led to the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Canary Islands, and the Portuguese settlement of Sao Tome (de Lempis 384). The demand for sugar steadily increased, and the early cultivation projects of Spanish settlers in places such as Hispaniola, Mexico, and Spanish America tended to be sugar cane. This increased sugar consumption has been linked to the discovery of chocolate, coffee, and tea (de Lempis 384).

Vanilla: (Sp. Vainilla, Lat. *Vanilla planifolia*) Native to Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Despite the presence of vanilla in Colmenero’s recipe, vanilla was not commonly used until the middle of the 19th century (Medina 44).

Appendix of Measurements

Cod: Probably a single pod, equivalent to about 1 tsp. dried and ground.

Dram: 1/8 of a fluid ounce or 1 teaspoon (British, obscure)

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