

5 minutes on... Chocolate

Chocolate is derived from the beans of the Cocoa tree. Archaeologists have found evidence that Mayans cultivated these trees from around the 7th century in the Yucatan region of Central America.

With the addition of water and various spices, including vanilla, cinammon and pepper, it became an expensive royal delicacy. Poorer people used it sparingly to add flavour to their staple diet of boiled corn.

Cocoa beans were so valuable that the Mayan people used them as a form of currency. So it would seem that 'chocolate money' has a distinguished history.

The Aztec Emperor Montezuma is quoted as saying:

"[Chocolate] is a divine drink, which builds up resistance and fights fatigue. A cup of this precious drink permits a man to walk for a whole day without food."

The Spanish explorer**egomaniac**/brutal robber baron* (*delete as applicable) Hernan Cortez was so intrigued by the idea of 'growing money' that he established a cocoa plantation of his own.

Later, Cortez introduced chocolate, sweetened with cane sugar, to the Spanish king. The king loved it, and before long the whole of Spain was infatuated with this new drink.

In the early part of the seventeenth Century, the Spanish princess Anna of Austria married the French King Louis the thirteenth and introduced the drinking of chocolate at the French court.

In 1657 the first chocolate-house was opened in London.

Introduction of chocolate to the United States did not occur until 1765 when a man called John Hanan brought cocoa beans from the West Indies to Dorchester, Massachusetts, thinking that it might be useful for medicinal purposes.

During the first half of the 19th century, several technological advances made chocolate easier and cheaper to produce.

In 1828, Dutchman Hendrick Van Houten invented the cocoa press. This helped reduce the price of chocolate and improved the quality of the beverage by squeezing out part of the cocoa butter, (fat that naturally occurs in cocoa beans) and allowing the cocoa to be more finely ground.

In 1847, Fry's chocolate factory in Bristol, England moulded the first chocolate bar that was suitable for general consumption.

Milk chocolate was invented in 1879 by the Swiss Henri Nestlé and Daniel Peter.

Children rapidly became a huge market for chocolate makers. This started a trend of

novelties with the 1923 launch of the Milky Way bar by the American Frank Mars. His son later invented the Mars bar.

At the same time, Milton Hershey, another American chocolate producer, expanded his chocolate sales through placing his product at the checkouts of department stores to encourage impulse buying (yep, it was HIS idea!).

Hershey is often referred to as the 'Henry Ford' of chocolate, because he mass-produced a quality chocolate bar at a price everyone could afford.

The chocolate industry is now a worldwide concern, with retail sales in excess of \$50 billion per year.

Cocoa trees require constant warmth and rainfall to thrive. They need to be protected from direct sunlight and sheltered from the wind. Cocoa trees grow only in tropical regions of Africa, Asia, South America and Central America, within about 15 degrees of the equator.

The Ivory Coast, a geographically small country, is a global cocoa giant, producing 43 percent of the world's 6.6 billion-pound annual crop. In neighbouring Ghana, two million farmers are employed in cocoa production and the plant accounts for 40 percent of total export revenues.

In 2002 investigative reporters revealed that 284,000 children were trapped in forced labour in the West African cocoa industry. The majority of these (200,000) were working along the Ivory Coast. Most of these child labourers had been trafficked from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo.

Leading figures in the chocolate industry said they would guarantee the end of trafficked labour in the cocoa industry by 2005. However, they have failed to do this, saying that because there are so many 'middle-men' involved it makes it difficult to track down the individuals responsible.

They have revised their targets, and pledged to sort out half the farms in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Fortunately, there is a way to help correct the economic imbalances of the cocoa system.

Fair Trade is an international monitoring and certification system that guarantees that farmers receives a guaranteed fair price for the cocoa they produce. This gives farmers the stable and sufficient income they need to support their families with dignity.

Fair Trade prohibits abusive child labour and forced labour. Farms are monitored at least once per year to ensure that all conditions are met.

Fair Trade chocolate and cocoa products are marked with 'Fair Trade Certified' logo. Most supermarket chains now carry Fair Trade brands, and some chocolate brands, including Divine, Dubble and Green & Black, are exclusively sourced from Fair Trade approved sites.

