The European Discovery of Chocolate

When Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Aztec king Montezuma II was ruling over a brilliant civilization. The Aztecs thought Cortés, with his beard and white skin, might be Quetzalcoatl returning to his people. As it happened, 1519 was a “one reed” year. Instead of treating Cortés like an enemy, the Aztecs welcomed him with great feasts that concluded with the serving of chocolatl in golden cups.

The chocolatl served to Cortés was not at all like modern chocolate beverages. The roasted, ground seeds of the cacao tree were mixed with cold fermented corn mash and wine or water. The mixture was then flavored with vanilla, hot spices such as pepper and pimiento, and sometimes with a little honey. It was a powerful and heavy drink, not sweet, but bitter and peppery.

An early illustration of the cacao pod

Montezuma and his people treated Cortés like a god, presenting him with a basket of cacao pods (to the left of the column) and other offerings.
This fanciful rendition of Cortés and Montezuma shows the Spanish adventurer bowing to the Aztec leader. In fact, Cortés imprisoned Montezuma and conquered the Aztec nation. Three hundred years of Spanish domination of Mexico and Central America followed. Cortés eventually became the wealthiest person in all of Spanish America, before returning to Spain to spend his final years.

Some historians say that it was intoxicating, or at least that it was sometimes blended with other ingredients that had mind-altering effects.

The Aztecs believed that the drink was an aphrodisiac, or love potion, and that it gave vigor, strength, and wisdom to those who drank it. Montezuma is said to have drunk more than 50 cups daily, and his large household consumed over 2,000 cups a day.
Cortés was not the god that the Aztecs had hoped for. He responded to the people’s generous welcome by imprisoning Montezuma, seizing large amounts of gold, and destroying Aztec temples. Eventually, he and his soldiers conquered the Aztec empire and turned their flourishing civilization into an enslaved Spanish colony. When Cortés returned to Spain nine years later, among the treasures he brought with him were cacao beans and the techniques for processing the seeds into a chocolate drink.

Sharing the Treasure

Many of the native groups of Mexico used cacao beans and valued them so much that they served as a type of money. Among the Mayas, 8 beans could be used to buy a rabbit; 100 beans would purchase a slave. When the Aztecs defeated the Maya Indians, they demanded sacks of cacao beans as payment from the conquered people.

Cortés fully appreciated the value of cacao beans and considered chocolate to be one of the finest riches that he brought back to the Spanish king, Charles I. The drink became extremely popular in the Spanish court after sugar was added to mellow its bitter flavor. Following the style of the Aztec preparation, the Spanish chocolate drink was at first prepared cold, and thick enough to hold up a spoon. It was beaten into a foam with a utensil known as a molinet, a wooden stick with several loose disks at one end, which was first used by the Aztecs.

Later, when it became fashionable to serve chocolate drinks hot, chocolate pots were made with holes in the lids to accommodate the molinet. The Spanish added spices to their chocolate drinks, including orange water,
Elegant chocolate pots were introduced when it became fashionable to serve chocolate hot rather than cold, as the Mexican Indians had drunk it. Chocolate pots of silver, gold, and porcelain were used throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Most chocolate pots had holes in the lids to accommodate the molinets.

Monks were the first chocolate makers in Europe. Here, some of them enjoy a cup of their concoction.

powdered white roses, cinnamon, musk, nutmeg, cloves, allspice, and aniseed, as well as almonds or hazelnuts. The spices and nuts may have been added to mask undesirable flavors picked up by the cacao beans on the long, damp voyages back from the Americas.

Chocolate and sugar were rare and expensive commodities in the late 1500s. The Spanish royalty wanted to keep these luxuries for themselves. The new drink remained a well-kept secret in the courts of Spain for almost 80 years after it was introduced. Monks in monasteries were entrusted with the task of roasting and grinding the precious cacao beans and shaping the chocolate into little rods or tablets to be used by royal chocolatiers (chocolate makers). Meanwhile, other European countries knew nothing about the new food. In fact, English and Dutch seafarers who captured Spanish trading ships during this time would throw the bags of brown beans overboard.
In 1606 an Italian merchant named Antonio Carletti brought chocolate from Spain to Italy. From Italy the drink made its way to Austria and Holland. When the Spanish princess Anne of Austria married King Louis XIII of France in 1615, she brought chocolate as a gift for her young husband and introduced the beverage to the French court at Versailles. The shopkeepers of France exported chocolate to England in the mid-1600s. Soon royal chocolate makers across the continent were preparing the drink. By the end of the century, "chocolate houses" had been established in most leading cities, offering the delicious beverage to wealthy citizens along with food, gambling, and lively discussion.

During the 1600s, colonists in the Caribbean and in Latin America became just as fond of chocolate as the native people. Almost everyone in the West Indies and Jamaica drank chocolate. Mexican women liked it so much that they had it served to them in church. When an astonished bishop forbade this practice, he was mysteriously murdered by a poison slipped into his own cup of chocolate!

The North American colonies were slower to adopt the new food. Until the mid-1700s, the chocolate that did make its way to North American settlements was imported from Europe and therefore outrageously expensive. But in 1765, John Hannon, a chocolate maker from Ireland, started a business with Dr. James Baker of Massachusetts to ship cacao beans to America directly from the Caribbean. The popularity of chocolate in America dates from this time.

Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, chocolate grew in popularity and economic importance. Doctors praised and prescribed the drink for the good health and vigor it was said to promote. Wealthy citizens craved it. Governments taxed it heavily. The Aztec drink had captured the taste buds of the world.

**Introducing Chocolate to North America**

John Hannon, an Irish chocolate maker, came up with the idea of importing cacao beans to the American colonies directly from the Caribbean islands. He received financial backing from Dr. James Baker of Massachusetts, who knew that chocolate was in great demand by apothecaries (druggists). The partners rented space in an old gristmill and ground the roasted cacao beans using water power. While sailing for the West Indies in 1779, Hannon was lost at sea, and Baker took over the company, which still bears his name and produces chocolate products used in baking.

*Dr. James Baker*