learning to like the Indian taste of chocolate, Europeans also absorbed several important Indian ideas about chocolate.

Chocolate in Native America

Before Europeans arrived in the Americas, chocolate and cacao were restricted to Mesoamerica—the region most famously associated with Aztec and Maya peoples. Mesoamericans greatly esteemed cacao beans and the chocolate beverages they yielded. Fermented and ground cacao “beans,” actually the seeds found within the large fleshy fruit pods of the cacao trees, were the basis for many beverages. Though there were countless ways to prepare chocolate, the classic concoction was “finely ground, soft, foamy, reddish bitter,” based on cacao and water, mixed with achiote to give it a reddish tint, chili peppers for a spicy edge, and wild honey for sweetening effect. Chocolate was also enhanced with the aromatic tropical flowers, designated by their NahuaL names: *hiloxochitl* (vanilla); *xochinacaztli*; and *meaxochitl*. The texture and visual effects of chocolate were just as important, as suggested by the Mesoamerican insistence on the “foamy” head, and the special drinks and serving spoons with which they consumed it.

Chocolate featured in the tribute that the Mexica, as the Aztecs called themselves, required of conquered people. Cacao beans as well as special cups fashioned from hollowed gourds were among tribute items listed in *The Essential Codex Mendoya*. The Mexica also participated in trading networks that crossed Mesoamerica. This long-distance trade was another way for them to procure cacao from trees that did not readily grow in the arid highlands of the Valley of Mexico. Cacao was necessary for chocolate, but it also served as currency throughout Mesoamerica, which is evidence of its status as a precious good throughout the region.

Chocolate in the Mexica world was associated with status within a deeply stratified society. One of the privileges of status was special, perhaps exclusive, access to chocolate. “If he who drank [chocolate] were a common person,” the Spanish missionary Bernadino de Sahagún observed of preconquest customs, “it was taken as a bad omen.” Chocolate was also used to reward soldiers for heroic service, for which warriors were also entitled to smoke fragrant pipes and carry special flowers, wear cotton cloaks, and adorn themselves with precious stones and feathers. Chocolate was also ritually consumed at betrothal and wedding ceremonies, and presented to visiting dignitaries. It was associated with a lifeforce, originating from or strengthened by its blood red coloring achieved by adding achiote. Chocolate, then, played an important role in Mesoamerican society as a drink that denoted status and that was embedded in a range of social, diplomatic, and religious rituals.

The first recorded European encounter with chocolate took place on Christopher Columbus’s fourth voyage in 1502, when he and his crew were near the coast of Mayan Honduras. They captured a trading vessel and found “almond”-shaped objects, cherished by the Mayans, among its cargo. Yet it took more than twenty years for Spaniards to learn more about the uses and taste of these objects. It was during Hernando Cortés’s invasion of Mexico that Spaniards acquired their first taste, or at least view, of chocolate. This initial encounter did not predict a great future for the commodity. In the spring of 1519, Cortés and his retinue landed on the coast of Veracruz. Two envoys of Moctezuma presented Cortés and his officers with jewels, precious

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Acquiring the Taste for Chocolate

MARCY NORTON

Chocolate—along with tomatoes, potatoes, maize, and tobacco—originated in the Americas. How did chocolate make its way to Europeans and Europe? One might think that Europeans knew a good thing when they saw it, and immediately began exporting chocolate to savor in the “Old World.” Or maybe Europeans found chocolate overly bitter and strange-tasting and so thought to sweeten it with sugar and Old World spices and make it “European.” Both of these answers are wrong.

Europeans neither found chocolate instantly tantalizing nor did they begin to experiment with Indian chocolate recipes to suit their palates right away. To understand how Europeans developed a taste for chocolate and integrated it into their culture requires understanding something about Mesoamerica, Spanish colonialism, and their interactions. Liking chocolate required learning to like chocolate. And if

stones, and feather works as well as abundant dishes of food. The Spaniards delighted in the durable goods, "staring at them with great happiness and contentment," but they expressed hesitation about the foodstuffs. The Spanish missionary, Diego Durán, who heard this story from Indian informants, reported that "when the time came to drink the chocolate that had been brought to them, that most highly prized drink of the Indians, they were filled with fear. When the Indians saw that they dared not to drink they tasted from all the gourds and the Spaniards refreshed themselves with chocolate, because in truth, it is a refreshing beverage."

For all their initial dislike of the drink, the Spanish saw the importance of chocolate in Aztec rites of diplomacy. This education was reinforced during the siege of Tenochtitlan, the Mexico capital and modern-day Mexico City. The men who accompanied Cortés and participated elsewhere in the Spanish conquest of the Americas were men preoccupied with status and eager for opportunities for advancement and fortune. It did not take long for these honor- and status-obsessed men to learn that in Aztec society chocolate connoted, if not conferred, high social rank.

**Chocolate and Colonialism**

By 1524, the Spanish had consolidated their rule in central Mexico and were busy organizing a colonial regime. Cacao cultivation and consumption survived the conquest, but not without major changes, especially in consumption. Cacao production itself expanded under Spanish rule. Having quickly learned that cacao was a valuable good and an item of tribute, Spaniards encouraged its continued cultivation. In fact, they intensified it, by increasing cacao tribute requirements. But who consumed chocolate? Evidence suggests that consumption spread among native society. With the social upheaval that came in the wake of the Spanish conquest, traditional social hierarchies partly collapsed. In 1553, traditional Indian nobles complained that some Indian commoners were violating social norms by ostentatiously consuming chocolate:

> They give one another a great deal of food, and the chocolate they drink is very thick, with plenty of cacao in it. When they find the chocolate just a little watery, then it is not to their liking and they do not want to drink it. Some pour it on the ground, whereby whoever has given his very good cacao to someone is affronted, but they imagine themselves very grand because of it.

Under Spanish colonialism, new Indian groups had access to chocolate, but the meaning of chocolate consumption remained the same: a reflection of power and prestige.

An increasing number of Spanish migrants also took to the beverage. Chocolate, however, was not instantly appealing. Those Europeans who had only scant exposure to the drink found it, by and large, disgusting. An Italian traveler, Giralomó Benzoní, who was welcomed with chocolate by Guatemalan Indians, first declared that the drink was fit only for pigs, though he eventually came to like it. The Jesuit writer José de Acosta likewise thought that "those who had not grown up" with chocolate "could not have a taste for it." Particularly revolting to him was the frothy top-layer of chocolate, "foam on top and bubbles like feces."

Spaniards had to learn to like chocolate and they did so through their continued dependence on Indians even as they assumed dominant positions. A distinctive feature of colonial Mexico was the creation of a mestizo, or mixed society. The first conquistadores who established homes in New Spain, as they named the colony, often took Indian wives or mistresses who were responsible for the domestic sphere, including cooking, and who introduced Spaniards to chocolate. As Spanish emigration increased and Spanish women began to come in larger numbers in the 1540s, elite Spaniards no longer married Indian women, though commoners continued to do so, but Indian women still were an indispensable part of the household as domestic servants. Early Spanish missionaries also forged close relations to Indian parishioners and reported on their gifts of chocolate.

**Chocolate Arrives in Europe**

By the second half of the sixteenth century, chocolate was fully part of creole or European colonial life. Chocolate's arrival in Europe was more hesitant. Erratic importations of chocolate occurred throughout the sixteenth century, offered as an exotic novelty by visiting retinues of Indians or brought home by a returning friar. The chocolate "take-off" appears in Seville in the first decades of the seventeenth century. The first publication devoted to chocolate, aimed at Spanish consumers, appeared in Seville in 1624, Santiago de Valverde Turíce's *Un Discurso de Chocolate*. By the 1620s, thousands of pounds of cacao and chocolate were imported annually. By 1633, enough of a chocolate manufacturing industry existed in Madrid for city authorities to institute licensing requirements for those who wanted to make and sell chocolate. And by the spring of 1727, Madrid had more than seven hundred thousand pounds of cacao and chocolate in stores and warehouses for a population of about one hundred thirty thousand.

Why did chocolate take so long to get a foothold in Europe? As there was nothing automatically appealing to Europeans about chocolate, a critical mass of chocolate aficionados—those with extensive New World experience for example—needed to develop in Spain before a market for chocolate could exist. This threshold was not crossed until the end of the sixteenth century. Not surprisingly, some of the precocious chocolate consumers came from communities with connections on both sides of the Atlantic. For instance, members of ecclesiastical orders helped disseminate the chocolate habit, as they had people constantly coming and going from far-off places.

There is a common—and erroneous—belief that Europeans needed to "transform" chocolate in order to make it appetizing. While it is true that Spaniards put sugar, which was unknown to indigenous Americans, into chocolate, this additive was not as innovative as it is often taken to be. Mesoamericans already sweetened chocolate with honey, and the step from honey to sugar—increasingly more available than honey because of expanding sugar plantations in the Americas—is a small one. Sugar can be seen as an "import substitute" for honey to approximate the taste of the original. Moreover, Europeans maintained the spice complex used by Mesoamericans. Like Mesoamericans, the first chocolate-drinkers in Europe mixed their chocolate with vanilla, *cochinchalui*—flowers nicknamed *orejuelas* or "little ears" by the Spanish for their ear-shapes, *mecaxochila*, and achioté. Like Mesoamericans, Europeans valued "foam" on chocolate—perhaps the antecedent to the contemporary custom of putting marshmallows in hot chocolate. Spaniards even adopted Mesoamerican chocolate drinking vessels—the special cup named *jícara*, after the Nahua *xicalli*. 
There were changes, of course. Spaniards began to use jicaras made of porcelain, rather than hollowed gourds. They tinkered with the recipes by using Old World spices—cinnamon, black pepper, anise, and sesame—but even so, the spices they chose suggest that they were trying to replicate the harder-to-find native flowers. Black pepper could be used instead of chilies and mecoxóchiti; cinnamon and cloves were found to be adequate substitutions for the orejuelas. Sugar replaced honey. Yet they intended to simulate original tastes, rather than create new palate sensations.

By the end of the eighteenth century, all that remained of the spice complex was cinnamon and sugar. But there is no indication the Spaniards deliberately tried to change the original chocolate. Rather, the inconvenience of imports and extension of consumers probably led to its simplification. Moreover, by then enough time had passed and the preparation of chocolate had become sufficiently simplified that the origins of the concoction were no longer remembered correctly. The myth that chocolate had conformed to European taste was consistent with the Spanish ideology of conquest that took for granted that colonialism involved the Europeanization of Indians. The reality, however, was that Europeans unwittingly developed a taste for Indian chocolate, which involved not only bodily changes but also the absorption of cultural material.

Just as Spaniards—in Spain as well as America—learned to replicate the taste, fragrance, look, and texture of Mesoamerican chocolate, they also learned to attribute Mesoamerican social meanings to it. For one, they had internalized the association between chocolate and noble distinction. By the seventeenth century, royal ceremonies in Spain itself involved chocolate. New allocations of household space similarly underscored chocolate’s arrival as part of the requisite trappings for noble life. The most important aristocrats apportioned living quarters—chocolate rooms—exclusively for chocolate. These spaces seem to have been conveniently enconced between the large hall and a drawing room where guests were received, emphasizing the often social nature of chocolate consumption. Spaniards learned from Aztecs that chocolate could assist in the maintenance of social distinctions in a heavily stratified society.

It did not take long before the chocolate habit spread beyond Spain to other parts of Europe. The European elite were a cosmopolitan bunch, and novel ideas, goods, and habits could spread quickly. Missionary orders, such as the Jesuits, and European aristocratic circles were important disseminators who provided a human network for the transfer of new habits such as chocolate drinking. Once people in England, Holland, France, Germany, and Italy had developed an appetite for the stimulating drink of chocolate, they were ready to embrace the caffeinated beverages of tea and coffee that would eventually surpass path-breaking chocolate as the choice beverage.

The chocolate we consume today does not preserve many of these features appreciated in seventeenth-century Europe. Hot cocoa is viewed most often as a children’s drink, rather than an adult’s delicacy. Our society is a democracy and so chocolate’s “aristocratic” lineage has been forgotten. But there are still vestiges of chocolate’s premodern and pre-Columbian past. The association between chocolate and romantic love continues to hold sway in our collective imagination, as evidenced by the box-of-chocolates’ status as the quintessential Valentine’s Day gift and its mythical status as an aphrodisiac. It is quite likely that Spaniards in the sixteenth