

Does chocolate grow on trees?

Yes, yes, yes, chocolate definitely grows on trees! The delightful chocolate derives from the beans inside the seed pod of the rainforest tree *Theobroma Cacao*, native of the Amazon basin. The bean contains the caffeine alkaloid *Theobromine*, a mild stimulant; it also contains the chemical *Phenyl ethylamine*, an amphetamine which induces a feeling of euphoria. Chocolate drink is one of a few popular drinks rich in antioxidants also found in red wine and tea, which may contribute to longevity. So, chocoholics all, let us brew ourselves a steamy and frothy cup of chocolate, unwrap a box of chocolate kisses, and rejoice! Our indulgence may be just what the doctor ordered for a long 'healthy, wealthy and wise' life.

Just imagine a world without chocolate! That is how it was in the Old World until the year 1519. The first European to discover this delicacy was Columbus, but the Spanish conquistador, Hernando Cortez, was the first person to bring the cacao seeds back to Spain. While in Mexico, Cortez noted that the Aztecs revered the *Theobroma tree* (the name *Theobroma* means food of the Gods) and consumed its beans in the form of a drink called 'xocolatl' (the name means bitter water). The common folk could only afford it on special occasions, but royalty couldn't get enough of it. These beans were also used as a currency and it was recorded that 100 beans could buy a healthy human slave. Cortez was so impressed that he shipped some 'xocolatl' beans which he named 'chocolatl' back to Spain as a gift for the king. The drink immediately became a sensation with the Spanish court so much so that they kept it a secret from the rest of Europe for over a century. Eventually, the secret got out as some ships carrying the beans from Mexico to Spain were captured

In Aztec and Maya times, the 'xocolatl' drink was made from roasted and ground beans mixed with maize, annatto, chilli and some other spices, and drunk cold. It was spicy and rather bitter. The Spanish added some honey, cinnamon and decorated it with peppers, anise, vanilla, almonds and other exotic spices. As the drink became more and more popular, spreading throughout England and Europe, it was further enriched with milk, cream and more sugar. A high tribute indeed to a humble bean! It was recorded that in the 17th century, 1 lb of chocolate cost the equivalent of £500 today.

Originally, chocolate was a beverage, sometimes bitter and spicy, sometimes sweet, but always a liquid food. About 160 years ago, chocolate was fashioned into sweet and creamy blocks, sometimes filled with dried fruits, nuts, liqueur and other ingredients that make up the many varieties of chocolate that we so love today.

In the wild, cacao trees grow to a height of 10 metres but the cultivated ones are pruned to a lower height to allow easier harvesting. Harvested beans are fermented, dried, roasted and ground into a paste which is known as cocoa liquor or cocoa mass. Cocoa butter is extracted from cocoa mass, leaving cocoa powder. The butter, when clarified, is used in many pharmaceutical preparations. Chocolate is a combination of cocoa powder with some of the cocoa butter put back. Baker's chocolate has no sugar added; bittersweet chocolate has some sugar; semisweet has more sugar; and milk chocolate has the most sugar plus some milk.

A chocolate drink contains a small amount of caffeine, so it may help relieve drowsiness and provide mild stimulation. It also contains *theobromine*, known to relax the smooth muscle lining the digestive tract and this may explain why many people have room for chocolate after a heavy meal. Cocoa also contains the compound *Phenyl ethylamine*, an antidepressant chemically similar to amphetamine; this may explain why chocolates make special 'love' gifts. Those who are 'in love' like to indulge in chocolate to heighten their loving feelings, those with 'broken hearts' binge on chocolate to benefit from some of its mood-lifting effects.

Chocolate has long been vilified as a cause of obesity, heart disease, acne, heartburn etc...It's no surprise that chocolate and any food that contains a large amount of chocolate are sometimes called the devil's food. However, on a personal note, I love chocolate and chocolate cake and can't help feeling that much of this reputation is undeserved!

We are in February, the month of Valentine's Day, love is in the air, let's celebrate with a piece of chocolate heart cake and enjoy!

