

Excerpt from *Bread, Wine, Chocolate: The Slow Loss of Foods We Love*

Chocolate soothes and ignites—as it has for thousands of years. Ten beans once bought the services of a prostitute for the night for the Nicaro people of Nicaragua, who, along with the Maya Indians and others in Mesoamerica, used the beans as currency. The Aztecs called their bitter blend of cacao, water and corn meal *xocoatl*. It's believed they “ritualistically [ate] cacao off each other's skin during sex, and the Aztec emperor Montezuma ... drank copious quantities of a chocolate-based beverage to enhance his virility.” Montezuma allegedly consumed up to 50 golden goblets of liquefied chocolate each day to satisfy his harem of wives.

But it wasn't just a substance of sex. “Both the Mayans and Aztecs believed the cacao bean had magical, or even divine, properties, suitable for use in the most sacred rituals of birth, marriage and death.” The Aztecs believed cacao was a gift of Quetzalcoatl, the god of wisdom, while the Maya called the seed “god's sustenance” and associated it with various deities, including the rain god and the gods of death and the underworld. The seeds were a blessing; they were holy.

This delicious blend of sanctity and profanity is likely why Carolus Linnaeus (the Swedish botanist who developed the classification system for plants and animals) categorized the fruit as *Theobroma cacao*: “food of the gods.”

If, two years ago, you had asked me to describe where chocolate comes from, I wouldn't have known. I might have said, with some certainty, that chocolate grows on trees. Maybe with some coaxing I would have envisioned something brown—a leaf or some kind of sap—but not plants thick with leaves bigger than my head. Not fantastical fruits full of creamy, white pulp enrobing 20 to 50 seeds.

In the 16th century, the Spanish invaded the Yucatán Peninsula and Mexico and carried those almond-shaped beans across the Atlantic Ocean back to Europe, as part of the spoils of their conquest. They stripped it of spiritual significance, sweetened it with sugarcane and made it the premier drink of the aristocracy, initially valued for its medicinal purposes but soon appreciated for taste. “Are we shocked to learn that a medicine or drug with supposedly curative powers was converted to recreational use?” anthropologist and co-author of *The True History of Chocolate* Michael Coe asks. “We should not be.”

Chocolate even inspired Italian adventurer, author and charmer Giacomo Casanova, who, in his diaries, called chocolate “the elixir of love” and preferred it to champagne, “frequently discussing his habit of consuming cups of chocolate in order to sustain his lustful exploits.”

Thankfully, this sexy folklore has now been affirmed by science. Multiple chemicals in chocolate make us feel love—or something like it. This includes the amino acid tryptophan, which is used by our bodies to make serotonin, a neurotransmitter that's connected to heart function and regulates our moods and sexual arousal. It

also includes phenylethylamine (PEA), the “love drug,” a stimulant in chocolate that’s related to amphetamine (speed). It causes our pulse to quicken and is released into our brain when we fall in love.

“But when the rush of love ends,” Diane Ackerman explains, “and the brain stops producing PEA, we continue to crave its natural high, its emotional speed. Where can one find lots of this luscious, love-arousing PEA? In chocolate. So it’s possible that some people eat chocolate because it reproduces the sense of well-being we enjoy when we’re in love.” It is also possible that some people seek this same substance to induce a semblance of well-being when they fall *out* of love.

And that’s why I had to go to its source. To understand biodiversity, for sure, but also for love—and everything like it. In each of my journeys there was a moment when a single glass of wine or slice of bread changed me. But chocolate was, and is, different. There is no one bar of chocolate that improved my life; they all have.

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