

The world's most storied food continued....

Chocolate was nearly always consumed as a drink during the first three centuries of its history in the Old World, and for probably two more millennia before that in the Americas. By the 1660s coffee and chocolate houses were springing up in most major European cities. These served to both introduce the New World beverage and to encourage those who had the means to enjoy it both in the cafés and at home. By the end of the century the upper classes had developed customs of chocolate service that included dedicated chocolate sets and sometimes chocolate kitchens. The first European chocolate boom had begun.

Productive cacao grows no more than 20 degrees above or below the equator. Practically speaking, most of it is harvested in tropical lands no more than 10 degrees above or below. This is far away from Continental Europe. Moreover, cacao seeds, unlike the other exotic beverages coffee and tea, need extensive and fairly exacting processing to make acceptable chocolate. Beans must be fermented and dried on site, then roasted, winnowed, ground into cakes, and prepared with sugar and other substances to make it reasonably attractive to a European or North American palate. In perhaps one of chocolate's most sorrowful legacies, the lands where cacao grows also were the lands of European colonization, coerced labor and slavery. As natives in the New World died in near-genocidal proportions, Europeans who discovered the profits of cacao farming relied on slaves from West Africa. Plantation-based slaves tended the trees and prepared the beans. Household slaves in North America undertook the grueling process of hand-grinding cocoa nibs into the chocolate enjoyed by the more privileged classes. Slave labor in the cocoa industries did not end until the early twentieth century. It was replaced often with coerced labor and, in recent years, child labor. This ugly underside of a worldwide treat still is part of what we today call the cocoa sector. In 2021 about six million people worldwide toiled on the cacao farms. The U.S. Bureau of International Labor Affairs in 2020 estimated that 1.5 million of them were children, working in sometimes harsh conditions, most of them in Ivory Coast and Ghana.

The nineteenth-century invention of chocolate in bar form marked the beginning of a second chocolate boom. It was no longer almost exclusively a drink that was messy to prepare, time-consuming to serve and rather expensive to consume. Chocolate could now be purchased at any newspaper kiosk or rail station. It offered quick energy, a fast snack for an industrializing labor force on the go. An ideal pick-me-up for workers. No more need for hoity-toity chocolate sets. Chocolate for the masses! Once an artisanal pursuit, chocolate manufacturing grew into a large-scale industry with potential for enormous profit. Cadbury, Fry, Rowntree, Baker, Menier, Cailler, Van Houten and Stollwerck were among famous early names that grew to dominate the industry during this century. Some of their advertising emphasized a newfound interest in food purity. Appeals depicting children and wholesome surroundings helped to develop standards of modern marketing as mass-circulation newspapers and full-color poster-based appeals grew to dominate urban daily life.

In the early twentieth century big companies such as Cadbury in England scrambled to introduce milk chocolate bars able to compete with the Swiss invention. Cadbury's Dairy Milk became the standard to meet outside of Swiss recipes. Milton Hershey after visiting the Chicago World's Fair became convinced that the future for confectionary manufacturing lay in chocolate. He sold his caramel company and worked to perfect his own kind of milk chocolate formula, one that could be made using modern techniques of mass production. Sometimes called "The Henry Ford of chocolate," in 1905 Hershey introduced an inexpensive milk chocolate bar for everyone. His Five-Cent Hershey Bar saw explosive American success.

The golden age of the chocolate candy bar in the 1920s and 1930s saw introduction of most snack bars that consumers find familiar today. Mars introduced the Milky Way in the United States and Mars Bar in England. Nestlé introduced the Crunch bar. Rowntree introduced KitKat. Competition in milk chocolate confections eclipsed some of the older chocolate powerhouses while introducing new ones. Chocolate became a coveted part of soldier kits in World War I. Before World War II the U.S. military asked big chocolate-makers to formulate chocolate rations for emergency use and snacking. In 1941 Mars introduced M&M's, a candy-coated milk chocolate able to stand up better to heat. After the war the heavily advertised sweet propelled Mars toward becoming the largest chocolate-maker in the United States. In 2021 Mars was the largest chocolate-maker in the world.

But the twentieth-century chocolate boom based on milk chocolate began on a dark note. Chocolate still came from the colonial world around the equator. And, despite a global promise to end slavery, some cacao plantation workers remained enslaved, or close to it. Investigations by muckraking reporters and Cadbury's own agent revealed that the Chocolate Islands, a Portuguese colony that in the early century produced most of the world's supply, was still relying on coerced labor from Angola. Most were in effect slaves. Promises to reform appeared to improve their lot, but renewed investigations in the 1920s still indicated coerced labor in cacao farming.

A high-flying reputation of chocolate took a dive after World War II, as the presumption that it could be a healthy food was swinging to the negative. Nutritionists observed that most mass-market milk chocolate actually included not a lot of real chocolate, but a whole lot of sugar. Sugar usually was the first thing on the ingredient list. And chocolate had become the treat of choice for children. Nutritionists blamed sugary milk chocolate not only for tooth decay, but for gum disease, obesity and generally an unhealthy life style. Its mildly stimulating effect from theobromine also was a concern to some. Parents pledged to reduce chocolate consumption for themselves as well as for their children—or they talked about reducing it. But the big manufacturers were hardly going out of business.

The pendulum swung back toward the end of the 1980s. Researchers began taking a serious look at chocolate's possible health benefits, for the first time bringing modern

scientific methods to cocoa research. What they found showed promise. Chocolate's high level of flavanols could provide a protective antioxidant effect. The benefit, however, did not appear to extend to milk chocolate. This offered one encouragement toward a 1990s explosion of small chocolate makers who brought back the complex tastes of dark chocolate carefully prepared.

The growth of fine chocolate as presumed health food was twinned with emergence of small operators who promised to address what had now become a centuries-old challenge: how to produce a world-favorite food without exploiting the labor that harvested the beans behind it. Slavery by 2000 was thought long eradicated from the cocoa sector. An investigation by BBC journalists, however, found that it apparently still existed among child laborers in West Africa. And while by then no colonial overlords were dictating labor practices, cacao farmers in much of the world still lived in poverty.

Enormous consolidation by the early twenty-first century squeezed Big Candy, as the world's top manufacturers are sometimes nicknamed, into just a handful of multinational manufacturers and processors. At the other end, small so-called bean-to-bar operators have grown in popularity, and the fine chocolate that for decades was difficult to find was now available even at some grocery stores and service stations. People perceived dark chocolate as being healthy. But research by the 2010s again was pushing the pendulum back, calling into question the beneficial impact to overall health of a few pieces of chocolate. In any case, in 2021 the industry itself continued to be healthy, profitable, and growing. Whether it would be sustainable facing climate change still was an open question.

The book:

Chocolate: A Cultural Encyclopedia, by Ross F. Collins and contributors Karl Bakkum, Dotty Curry and Michael J. Stein. Bloomsbury Publishing/ABC-Clio, 2022, 422 pages. American Library Association 2023 Outstanding References Sources winner.

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