

Story of modern chocolate is an old – and bitter – tale

By Smithsonian Institute, adapted by Newseia staff on 09.28.16



An example of a pot used by the ancient Maya. Photo: Photo: Anciano/Flickr

It is a sunny morning in San Francisco, California. People scoot around a tiny chocolate store. They are checking ovens and sorting cacao beans. This is the home of Dandelion Chocolate. The tools and taste have changed over time. But the way of turning cacao beans into chocolate hasn't changed. It was almost the same thousands of years ago.

The ancient Olmec people were in Mexico. They lived near the Aztecs and Maya. The Olmecs were probably the first to roast cacao beans. They made them into chocolate drinks. They may have done this more than 3,500 years ago.

Cacao Seeds Don't Taste Like Modern Chocolate

Plain cacao seeds taste bad. They don't taste like chocolate. "How would you think to take the seed ... and roast it?" says Hayes Lavis. He works at a museum. Maybe someone was eating the fruit. Then they spit the seeds into the fire. The rich smell of them roasting maybe inspired the people to try something new.

The bad taste of cacao was still in early Maya drinks.

"Rarely did they add any sweetener," says Joel Palka. He is a professor. He studies ancient peoples. The Maya used herbs and spices to change cacao's taste. Some flavors were chili, vanilla and magnolia.

For The Maya, Cacao Was Special

Cacao was a special food for the Maya. "You would have to get together to prepare the chocolate," Palka said. In Mexico, some people still grow chocolate with their family.

Cacao drinks were often part of celebrations. Ancient paintings show cacao in stories. It was even used in weddings. Sometimes a woman had to prove she could make cacao the right way.

Cacao beans were also used as money.

Palka thinks chocolate became so important because it is hard to grow. It can't grow just anywhere. Cacao needs a certain kind of dirt. It also needs rain and lots of shade.

Cacao Played A Big Role

Cacao was a big part of ancient people's lives.

It is often said that chocolate was an ancient medicine. The Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés wrote about chocolate. He describes it as a drink that builds strength. Another explorer wrote that one Aztec king drank 50 cups a day of chocolate.

These are probably just stories. "I don't think any living person could drink 50 cups of cacao," says Hayes Lavis. The Maya probably didn't think chocolate was medicine either. It was just part of their food, Lavis said, and they knew it was good for them.