

AZTEC CHOCOLATE

It may surprise you to know that chocolate isn't new. The Aztecs were enjoying chocolate long before anybody in Europe even knew it existed. In fact, the first time it was introduced to Europeans, they had no idea what to do with it and refused to eat it.

Chocolate hasn't always been the sweet treat that you might enjoy today. The Aztecs didn't even really eat it. They used the cacao beans to make a very bitter drink. This was often given to their leaders during celebrations. One of the most famous Aztec rulers was Montezuma II. There is now a brand of chocolate named in his honour. To get rid of the bitter taste, the Aztecs mixed spices and corn into their drinks.

Christopher Columbus was one of the first foreign explorers to take the cacao beans out of South America. He took them back to Spain where they were declared too bitter to do anything useful with. It wasn't until Hernán Cortés travelled to Mexico in 1519 that Europeans began to understand the delights of chocolate. He saw the Aztecs prepare and present their chocolate drink for Montezuma II and took the idea back to Europe. People in South America still make chocolate drinks the traditional way; the drinks are known as 'Chilate'.

Even though the Aztecs used the cacao beans to make their chocolate drinks, that wasn't their only use. They used the white pulp around the beans to make wine and other drinks. Because of their love of the cacao beans, the Aztec placed great value on them. Tribes who were ruled by the Aztecs were often asked to pay taxes in the form of beans. The beans were used as currency inside Aztec cities as well. It was very unlikely that a slave or person of the lower classes would ever be seen drinking or eating chocolate. For them, the beans were too valuable. Slaves were able to save up their beans and use them to buy their own freedom.

When the Aztecs prepared their chocolate drink, an oily layer formed on the surface. This was cocoa butter. They used this as a suncream to protect them from the harsh Mexican sun. Cocoa butter is still used today in suncream, moisturising cream and as one of the main ingredients in white chocolate.

Chocolate also had deep, religious significance for the Aztecs. They believed that the cocoa tree was a symbolic bridge between Earth and heaven. Before they sacrificed their enemies to their gods, they would feed them chocolate to ensure their gods were kept happy. Cocoa beans were given to priests during important ceremonies: couples would drink a cup of chocolate and exchange cacao beans during their marriage ceremony. They believed that drinking chocolate would give them some of Quetzalcoatl's (their god of learning and the wind) wisdom.

The Aztecs spoke a language called Nahuatl. Some words from the Nahuatl language still exist today, albeit slightly changed. In fact, the Nahuatl term for 'chocolate' was 'Xocolatl'. Sound familiar? (Hint: The X has a "ch" sound when spoken)



VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Find and copy a phrase that shows not many Europeans had taken the cacao beans before Christopher Columbus.
2. Find a word that tells you people still do something the same way as the Aztecs.
3. Which word in the text is a synonym for 'importance'?
4. True or false: The origin of the word 'chocolate' was originally an Aztec word?
5. What does the word "symbolic" tell you about the Aztec's beliefs?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

I

Why were tribes asked to pay taxes with cacao beans?

R

What did couples do at their marriage ceremony?

I

Why wouldn't Aztec slaves drink chocolate?

S

Why was Hernán Cortés important to the history of chocolate in Europe?

E

Why has the author started with the first sentence?

What impact does this have on the reader?

Answers:

1. One of the first foreign explorers
2. Traditional
3. Significance
4. True
5. It wasn't an actual bridge, but symbolised the link to their gods

I: The Aztecs valued them

R: Drink chocolate and exchange beans

I: They would save the beans to buy freedom instead

S: He saw how the Aztecs used it

E: It presents an interesting fact. It tells the reader that the text is going to contain new and interesting information.