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## **Chocolate, The Exhibition**

### **From the Ancient Rainforest to the Supermarket Shelf, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Takes Visitors on a Delicious Expedition**

A unique tree in a lush tropical environment. A seed so precious it was used as money. A spicy drink and a sweet snack. A heavenly craving and a sublime pleasure. Chocolate is all this...and much more. Explore the relationship between human culture and this rainforest treasure in *Chocolate, The Exhibition*, a traveling exhibit making its west coast debut from February 16 to May 11, 2003, at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

*Chocolate, The Exhibition* will immerse you in a sweet experience, engage all your senses, and reveal facets of chocolate you may never have thought about before. You'll explore the plant, the products, the history, and the culture of chocolate through the lenses of botany and ecology, anthropology and economics, conservation and popular culture.

#### **Liquid gold**

Bon bons, hot fudge, frozen chocolate bars. Many of us know chocolate today primarily as a candy or a sweet dessert. But this isn't true for everyone. "People in the L.A. area with family roots in Central America and Mexico may know chocolate as a drink with roots going back several thousand years," says W. Warner Wood, assistant curator of Latin American anthropology at the Natural History Museum. In Pre-Columbian times, people across much of Mexico and Central America drank their chocolate in a frothy spicy drink, made from the seeds of the cacao tree and a variety of spices and flavorings such as chile, honey, and vanilla. This drink, with minor changes in its recipe, is still an important part of the culture of people from across this region today.

How did humans first come to taste these bitter seeds, found deep in the pulp of a large, rough pod, and how did they discover the benefits of cacao? Janine Gasco, research associate at the Natural History Museum and anthropology professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, says "although we may never know all of the preparation methods and recipes for cacao, we do know that it was common to remove the seeds from the pod, let the seeds ferment, dry and then roast them, grind them, and add water and other ingredients. The final touch was to pour the concoction back and forth from one vessel to another to create the froth, a critical part of the chocolate beverage."

Even though cacao grows only in the rainforest, it was valued by people from all cultures of Mexico and Central America. Ancient Mexican and Central American peoples have probably been preparing cacao-based drinks for more than 3,000 years. According to Gasco, “the earliest definitive evidence comes from cacao residues found inside a Maya ceramic drinking vessel from Belize that dates to approximately 600 BC.” Throughout the region, the frothy cacao drink, used in ritual and feasting, was portrayed in numerous images on pottery and in codices (the books of ancient Mexico and Central America). The seeds were used as religious offerings, they were paid as tribute, they were used to cure a number of ailments, and by Aztec times (ca. AD 1350), cacao seeds also served as currency.

The first European to see cacao was Columbus, who during his 1502 voyage, came upon a large Maya trading canoe in the Gulf of Honduras. The canoe was full of valuable trade goods, including cacao seeds, which Columbus noted were of obvious value to the people. When Spaniards reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519, Gasco points out, instead of gold, they found storehouses of cacao seeds, and they found the Aztec ruler, Motecuhzoma, drinking the cacao beverage in a golden goblet.

### **Rooted in the rainforest**

It is widely believed that wild cacao originated in the northern lowlands of South America, but there it was the sweet pulp of the cacao pod, not the seeds, that people relished. It wasn't until cacao trees found their way to Mexico and Central America, Gasco notes, that humans began to discover their potential. To better understand the origins of cacao use, botanists are now studying the genetic relationships among modern cacao trees, and they may soon be able to trace their journey from South to Central America, providing us with new clues about how humans discovered the wonders of chocolate.

A beautiful plant with delicate flowers, the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao*), grows only within 20° latitude (about 1,380 miles) of the equator. It's relatively small, no more than 30 or 40 feet high, and grows naturally in the rainforest understory, in the shade of larger, canopy trees. Beautiful and unusual, the cacao tree is quite different from most of the rainforest trees from which people procure products—canopy trees like the rubber tree. Its pollinators, for example, are neither butterflies nor hummingbirds but midges, tiny flies that thrive in the decaying vegetable matter and other debris at the base of the tree. Its flowers, to take another example, are on the trunk and lower branches where midges can easily find and pollinate them instead of the ends of upper branches.

Though humans have now taken cacao from its native home in the Americas to grow it in West Africa, Indonesia, and other tropical lands, the plant remains rooted in its ecosystem. When the cacao tree is grown in cleared, orchard-like fields instead of the understory of the tropical rainforest, it (and the soil) don't do

well.

Under these conditions, soils erode and become less fertile and cacao trees are less hardy and more susceptible to various diseases and molds. To counter such problems with soil fertility and plant hardiness, many growers today add fertilizers and pesticides that can harm both the workers and the environment. At the same time, though, many cacao farmers and scientists are working together to find ways to grow cacao profitably without destroying the rainforest habitat.

### **Global commodity... cultural icon**

Spaniards, and later other Europeans, did not take long to gain an appreciation for chocolate. By the seventeenth century a chocolate drink—now made with sugar—had become popular across Europe. A growing demand for chocolate coincided with the introduction of Old World diseases, which caused high death rates among the native peoples of Mexico and Central America who grew cacao. This prompted Spaniards to establish cacao plantations in Venezuela and Ecuador, where a heartier variety of cacao flourished and where slaves provided the labor.

Sustainable cacao-growing, environmental protections, and supporting the genetic diversity of wild cacao are increasingly important topics today, for economic as well as botanical reasons. Thanks to technological advances and mass production—not to mention enormous amounts of advertising—chocolate has become a part of the global market economy. Today, cacao seeds are traded on the commodities market (under the name “cocoa”), right along with pork bellies and soy.

The value of chocolate can be measured in sales-- \$13 billion a year in the U.S.—or in symbols. In this country, for example, chocolate is closely linked not only with love but with patriotism: chocolate has been issued to U.S. soldiers since World War I, and it's even accompanied astronauts into space. And, of course, chocolate has a place in nearly every holiday celebration in the U.S.: heart-shaped boxes of chocolate for Valentine's Day, chocolate bunnies for Easter, wrapped candies for trick-or-treaters at Halloween, and cups of hot cocoa to warm Christmas carolers.

### **Liquid gold's historical continuities**

In Central and Southern Mexico and across much of Central America, chocolate's central place in ceremonial and daily events continues. Today, a modified version of the frothy drink so important to the ancient Maya is still an important part of culture in Mexico's indigenous communities. Chocolate, not coffee, is drunk with breakfast on a regular basis throughout the region.

In the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, Wood says, “most festive events, from holiday feasts to the meals accompanying weddings, baptisms, and even funerals, would be incomplete without this ancient drink.” It is used as an offering on altars during the Days of the Dead when solid chocolate is also shaped into

miniature candy skulls to be passed out to children. In addition to being an important part of indigenous Mexico's cultural heritage in its drink and candy forms, chocolate is also an important ingredient in the cooking sauce called mole negro—a dish that, when served over chicken or turkey, is often the main course on special occasions.

In Southern California, a new chapter in the history of chocolate is being written. In the Los Angeles area, families with ties to southern Mexico, for example, may start nearly every breakfast with the chocolate drink and a sweetbread, as would their relatives in Mexico. Commercially produced and packaged versions of the ground concoction of cacao, sugar, almonds, and cinnamon used to make today's version of the "liquid gold" drink, Wood adds, are widely available in area grocery stores and a growing number of Mexican restaurants now have one or more entrées featuring mole negro. Finally, chocolate is finding new expression in multi-cultural Los Angeles where local "watering holes" may be well known for their chocolate margaritas or martinis and where cutting-edge chefs dream up new fusion cuisines combining mole negro with Asian or even Continentally inspired dishes.

These popular uses of chocolate, along with a fascinating array of chocolate advertising and packaging and a look at myths about chocolate, are all part of the traveling exhibition, which is from The Field Museum in Chicago.

### **National Tour**

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is the second stop and the West Coast debut for the traveling exhibition. Chocolate will travel to museums nationwide until 2006.

### **Organizers**

Chocolate and its national tour were developed by The Field Museum, Chicago.

### **Sponsors**

This project was supported, in part, by the National Science Foundation.

### **Public Information**

The Museum is open on weekdays from 9:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. and weekends from 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Museum admission is \$8 for adults, \$5.50 for students and senior citizens, and \$2 for children ages 5-12. Children under 5 and Museum Members are free. For additional information, the public may call 213-763-DINO or visit [www.nhm.org](http://www.nhm.org).

### ***Editor's Note:***

- An on-line press kit for this exhibit will be available after January 6 at [www.nhm.org/news](http://www.nhm.org/news)

- Media preview day is Friday, February 14 from 10 a.m. to Noon, or by appointment.
- For images depicting this exhibit or to set up interviews contact us at 213/763-3517 or [media@nhm.org](mailto:media@nhm.org).

### **Museum Background**

The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is a national leader in research, exhibitions and education. Founded in 1913, it is one of the preeminent natural and cultural history museums in the United States, safeguarding more than 33 million specimens and artifacts in its collections. The kid-friendly Discovery Center welcomes children and families with hands-on natural history specimens. The accompanying Insect Zoo, the largest in the Western United States, features live insects from around the world. Permanent exhibit halls include dramatic collections of fossils and dinosaurs, exquisite gems and minerals, grand animal dioramas, a California history hall, and a stunning Native American hall, along with ever-changing special exhibitions. For further information about the Museum, visit the Museum's website at [www.nhm.org](http://www.nhm.org) or call (213) 763-DINO.

The mission of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County is to inspire wonder, discovery and responsibility for our natural and cultural worlds.

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