



# Let Them Eat Chocolate

KAREN MOLINE ON THE LITTLE BEAN THAT BECAME ONE VERY SWEET BUSINESS.

"What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead..."

—George Bernard Shaw

Next time you bite into a chocolate truffle, savoring the exquisite explosion of flavors on your palate, you may want to remind yourself that this luscious morsel owes its existence to a terrible mistake.

Nearly five hundred years ago (in 1519, to be precise), the conquistador Hernán Cortés set foot in the New World, near what is now Veracruz, Mexico. He wasn't on a meet-and-greet; his mission was to conquer and plunder. Imagine his astonishment, then, when he made his way to the Aztec metropolis of Tenochtitlán, and instead of chopping off his greedy little head, the emperor Montezuma spied his white skin and thick beard and mistook him for the god Quetzalcoatl. Cortés had no idea that a prophecy had pinpointed that year as the one in which the pale-skinned Quetzalcoatl would appear.

Such a divine guest deserved a banquet, and after one, Cortés could not help but notice as Montezuma drank a dark potion from a golden goblet and strode off to his harem. To his Spanish ears the name of the elixir sounded like "chocolatl," a combination of the Mayan *xocolatl* and the Aztec *cacahuatl*.

And from then chocolate became a billion-dollar business.

Cortés was no dummy. Unlike Christopher Columbus, who'd thought the pounded, fermented, and roasted goo that came from the enormous seed pods of the cacao trees was worthless and disgusting, the conquistador paid attention. When he saw how the native tribes used cacao beans as money, he loaded his galleons with them and sailed home.

It didn't take the Spaniards long to turn *chocolatl* into big business in the New World territories they plundered. A sixteenth-century historian, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, claimed: "Cocoa passed currency as money among all nations; thus a rabbit in Nicaragua sold for ten cocoa nibs, and one hundred of these seeds could buy a tolerably good slave."

Back in those dark days, at least, *chocolatl* proved that money *did* grow on trees.

Spanish *chocolatl* was nothing like a Hershey's bar. It is not known who first had the delightful idea of blending sugar or honey into the spicy dark paste and warming it up, but the world owes him or her eternal gratitude. Sweetened, spicy hot chocolate was

soon all the rage in Spain. When France's Louis XIII married the Spanish Habsburg princess Anna of Austria in 1615, one of her maids, whose sole responsibility was to prepare her mistress's chocolate, came with her.

Preparing chocolate back then was not so easy. In his 1631 book *Curioso tratado de la naturaleza y calidad del chocolate*, the Andalusian physician Antonio Colmenero de Ledesma included this Aztec-based recipe: "Take one hundred cocoa beans, two chilies, a handful of anise seed and two of vanilla (two pulverized Alexandria roses can

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be substituted), two drams of cinnamon, one dozen almonds and the same amount of hazelnuts, half a pound of white sugar, and enough annatto to give some color. And there you have the king of chocolates." And then he claimed that chocolate made that way was not only good for the digestion and a potent aphrodisiac but, "It makes the drinker 'Fat, and Corpulent, faire and Aimable.'"

How standards of beauty have changed!

This chocolate tradition continued when the homely Spanish princess Maria Theresa became engaged to the French king Louis XIV in 1643 and hoped to curry her fiancé's favor with a gift of chocolate, bound up in an opulent golden chest. "The king and chocolate," claimed she, "were my only two passions."

Alas for her, Louis's many mistresses proved more enticing than Maria Theresa's chocolate, but she started another fad, this time among the nobility lounging around the hothouse of Versailles.

"It flatters you for a while, it warms you for an instant; then all of a sudden, it kindles

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a mortal fever in you,” wrote the renowned Marquise de Sévigné. “If you are not feeling well, if you have not slept, chocolate will revive you.”

The king loosened his grip on the Versailles chocoholics when, on May 28, 1659, he granted a twenty-nine-year patent to David Chaillou, a Toulouse-born officer who had been attached to the queen's service. Chaillou was allowed “the exclusive privilege of making, selling, and proposing for consumption a certain composition called chocolate ... whether as liqueur or pastilles or in boxes, or in such other manner as may please him,” and the *chocolatier du roi* quickly set up shop in the rue de l'Arbre Sec near what is now the Louvre. At the first *maison du chocolat* in France, he served hot chocolate to aristocrats who flocked in for steamy drinks and steamier assignations. Chaillou did not have to worry about the rabble; not only were aristocrats the only French citizens who could afford chocolate, they were also the only ones allowed to purchase it.

Not so in London, where a chocolate house, The Coffee Mill and Tobacco Roll, had already opened to wild acclaim two years before. Although the chocolate was prodigiously expensive there as well—selling for ten to fifteen shillings per pound—any Englishman who could afford the entrance fee was allowed to sit inside and yak about the shortcomings of the French. English drinking chocolate was slightly different from the French: It used milk instead of water. Drunkards mixed the chocolate paste into Madeira.

Although consumption of chocolate declined in the waning years of Louis XIV's reign, Marie Antoinette revived the aristocracy's passion for it a century later, and not because she craved chocolate cake.

One day in 1780, Marie was complaining to the royal family's pharmacist, Sulpice Debaube, about the bitter taste of some of her medicines. Debaube listened carefully. He was, you see, none other than the great-great-grandson of David Chaillou.

Marie, who'd been fond of chocolate since her youth in Vienna, wondered if she might be able to mix her revolting medicines into her hot brew to disguise their taste. Debaube gently demurred, as the heat of the chocolate would either intensify their awfulness or render them useless. And then he had one of those *voilà* moments. Why not create a form of solid chocolate with medicine inside?

And so the pistole, made only of cocoa, sugar, and Marie's medicine, was invented. Marie decided that it should be pressed in the shape of a coin, not to emphasize her immense wealth, but because the chocolate coins would look ever so nice when arranged on a silver tray. The pistoles were such a hit that Marie soon asked for med-

icine-free versions, and Debaube was happy to oblige. He created pistoles flavored with orange blossom, orgeat (a mixture of orange and almond) cream, coffee, vanilla, and almond milk (reportedly Marie's favorite).

Despite his royal connections, Debaube managed to keep his head during the French Revolution, and he opened his own chocolate shop to the public in the early nineteenth century, adorned on the front with a phrase from Horace, *Utile Dulci*—“Useful and Agreeable.” He certainly recognized that chocolate was both healthy and sweet. (And you can still buy pistoles like Marie's from Debaube & Gallais today.)

These pistoles (along with the Industrial Revolution) signaled the beginning of the end of the romance of chocolate as something to be savored as a hot, spiced liquid. Steam engines were not just for pulling trains or spinning wheels—they could also grind cacao beans, as Dr. Joseph Fry of Bristol, England, discovered in 1795. Chocolate, once the aristocracy's sweet preserve, could now be made for the masses.

As the century progressed, so did the appeal of chocolate, especially after the Fry company and the Cadbury brothers figured out how to mold it into bars; Rodolphe Lindt of Berne, Switzerland, invented “conching,” whereby he heated and then rolled chocolate with sugar, giving it a smoother mouth feel; and another Swiss genius, Daniel Peter, created a way to add milk to a chocolate bar. Smart guy, Peter. He took his invention to a local company named Nestlé.

Today, cacao beans are grown on organic estates, with some beans even classified as *grand cru à la vintage* wine. Tastings are as much the rage as they'd been in David Chaillou's shop. And modern medicine has been able to decode chocolate's active ingredients, proving that they do indeed possess the health benefits and aphrodisiac effects first noted by Spanish physicians.

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Sulpice Debaube understood why. His instructions for eating chocolates were precise: “Place a chocolate in the middle of your tongue. Chew slowly, several times. Let the chocolate linger for several seconds, during which time you may notice a warm sensation from the outer coating of cocoa as it melts on the tongue. The bonbon—still resting on the palate—then begins to withdraw into a blend of subtle aromas until finally it overwhelms the palate with all of the richness of its flavors.”

What happens next is entirely up to you. BG