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The Story of Chocolate

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Chocolates are not just for special occasions like Valentine's Day or Easter. Since U.S. consumption averages 12 pounds per person each year . . .

Chocolate is very much a part of our everyday lives. It is consumed at home, at work, at celebrations, and during certain holidays, such as Valentine's Day. It also comes in many varieties from dark to milk chocolate. This lesson will chart chocolate's rich history and explore its origins – how the cacao bean is grown and harvested, the chocolatiers who make and sell it, and highlight various locations in West Virginia and around the world who celebrate this sweet confection.

The origins of chocolate

The origin of the word "chocolate" can be traced to Latin America, specifically the Mayan and Aztec people. In fact, the Aztec word "xocoatl," was the name of a bitter drink brewed from cacao beans. Both the Mayans and Aztecs believed the cacao bean had, not only magical properties, but was so valuable that it was used as money.

Chocolate made its way to Europe and then back to the American colonies via the Spanish. The demand for chocolate grew tremendously in the colonies as its popularity as a drink increased. Drinking chocolate was an activity open to all classes of people, because it was very affordable.

The Dutch are credited with the first step in creating solid chocolate. In 1847, Joseph Fry produced the first modern chocolate bar when he mixed melted cacao butter into Dutch cocoa to make a moldable chocolate paste. This led to the creation of Cadbury in England and Nestle in Switzerland in the late 1860s. However, it was Nestle who created milk chocolate, which remains a popular chocolate among Americans.

Understanding the cacao bean

All chocolate comes from the cacao (pronounced Kah Kow) tree. Cacao trees have grown in Central and South America for thousands

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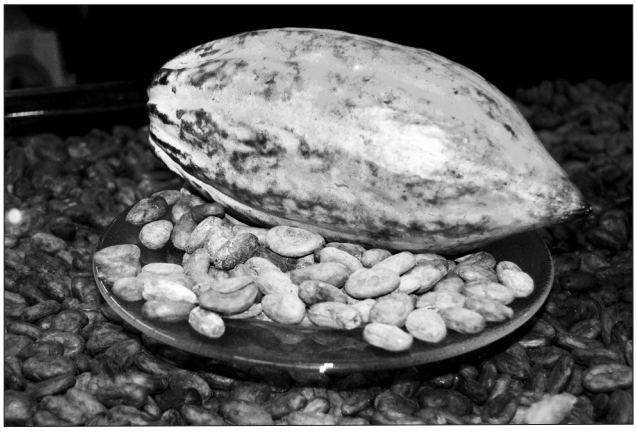
of years. Midges, tiny flies, play an important role in pollinating the flowers that adorn cacao trees. The cacao flower is complicated in design, and the midge is the only insect that can work its way through the flower to pollinate it.

Animals are also instrumental in the overall production of chocolate. Monkeys, rodents, and birds use their teeth, bills, and claws to break into the cacao pods to eat the sweet pulp inside. Since the cacao seeds are bitter, the animals spit them out; therefore, cacao trees rely entirely on these animals to spread their seeds along the rainforest floor to start the next generation of trees.



Cacao farming is very labor intensive. Because the pods grow directly off the trunk and branches of the tree, machines cannot be used to harvest the pods. Farmers must harvest cacao pods and prune the trees by hand. The chocolate industry has come under pressure in recent years due to child laborers used in the harvesting of cacao bean.

Chocolatiers

The average U.S. citizen consumes approximately 12 pounds of chocolate per year. The chocolate industry has produced a range of products to appeal to a wide variety of consumers. Many companies also advertise a host of benefits for their hearts to include lower blood pressure, lower "bad" LDL cholesterol, and lower risk of heart disease. This applies primarily to dark chocolate that contains more than 70 percent cacao and is low in sugar and fat.

West Virginia boasts around 30 producers of chocolates, candy, and confections. Two examples of West Virginia chocolatiers are DeFluri's Fine Chocolates in Martinsburg and Holl's Chocolate in Vienna. Local chocolate shops have advantages, such as fresh products, custom orders, and special designs. For instance, covered and dipped fruits, like strawberries, apples, and bananas, taste and look better when made daily. For custom recipes made to order for diets, allergies, or unusual flavor profiles, working with a small producer is much more viable.

Chocolate festivals

West Virginia has three notable chocolate festivals, namely the Chocolate Festival in Lewisburg, the Martinsburg Chocolate Festival in Martinsburg, and the Annual West Virginia Chocolate Festival in Ripley. These festivals provide plenty of chocolates to sample, baking demonstrations, and other activities. There are also a number of chocolate festivals within driving distance – in Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia and several international festivals in France, Germany, Italy, and Mexico.

Interesting facts about chocolate

- Worldwide 40 million to 50 million people depend upon the cacao bean for their livelihood.
- In 1861, Richard Cadbury came up with the idea for the first heart-shaped box of chocolates.
- The largest chocolate bar in the world was made in 2011 in Derbyshire, England. The bar weighed almost six tons.

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