

## BORDER CROSSINGS

# ORIGINS

## BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

### Cacao (Chocolate)



Image Image from a Mayan ceramic depicting a container of frothed chocolate.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chocolate#/media/File:Mayan\\_people\\_and\\_chocolate.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chocolate#/media/File:Mayan_people_and_chocolate.jpg)

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Olmecs used the name 'kawkaw' for cacao. Between 200BC and 400AD the name spread into use in Mayan territory and later into what we now call Central America. The Aztecs word 'cacahuatl' (meaning 'cacao bean') is derived from the Olmec and Mayan use.

When was this plant first documented?

Christopher Columbus, mistaking cacao for almonds, brought back cacao to Spain but it did not gain popularity as he and his crew did not know how to use the plant. On 30th October 1520, Hernando Cortés sent a letter to the King of Spain containing the first mention of chocolate for Western Europeans. Cacao gained popularity in Europe after Cortés gave some to King Charles of Spain in 1528.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are at least 10 main varieties of cacao. The most widely used varieties are:

Forastero - the most widely grown variety, with high yields. It is the most disease resistant variety and now accounts for 80% of the world's cacao production

Criollo - this variety has the best flavour, but has low yields and is prone to disease. It makes up 1% of the world's cacao production

Trinitario - a hybrid of Forastero and Criollo accidentally created in Trinidad in the late 1720s. It accounts for around 3% of the world's cacao production

### Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Cacao trees only grow in hot, humid and shady locations. The people of Mesoamerica planted their cacao trees in the rainforest where they could ensure that they would be kept warm, wet and shaded. The rain forest also supports many insects which pollinate the cacao tree flowers.

These plots look nothing like the rows of trees in modern orchards. In fact, to the first Europeans to see them, it wouldn't have looked like an area for growing a crop at all.

Before contact with Europeans, cacao was only used as a drink. Because cacao was highly valued, it was only drunk by adult males - the bravest warriors, government officials, military officers, priests, royalty and sometimes it was given as part of a ritual to sacrificial victims. The Aztecs considered cacao to be an intoxicant and therefore did not consider it suitable for women and children.

### How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

In Maya mythology, the Sovereign Plumed Serpent god gave the Maya cacao from a mountain after humans were created from maize. In April, the Maya hold a festival to honour Ek Chuah, the god of cacao. To celebrate this event, there used to be animal sacrifices, and offerings of cacao, feathers and incense are made to the Gods.

The Aztecs have a similar myth. Quetzalcoatl, a plumed serpent god, found cacao in a mountain and gave it to the Aztecs. Cacao was made into an offering to many Aztec gods and often offered with blood from pierced ear lobes and tongues. Sacrificial victims were often given a cacao drink before being sacrificed to give them comfort and strength.

### When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Cacao was introduced to Britain in the early 1600s. It was drunk by the very wealthy and later by intellectuals and radicals.

### Special properties

The Badianus Chronicles written in 1552 describe the use of cacao flowers to treat fatigue. The Florentine Codex describes a drink made of cacao, maize and herbs to treat shortness of breath and to reduce fever.

According to Agustin Farfan, in his book "Tractado Breve de Medicina" written in 1592, warmed drinking chocolate was used as a laxative.

Cacao was used to treat many illnesses. It was used to treat upset stomachs, coughs, gout, scurvy, rickets and many other stomach or digestion related illnesses.

Cacao was also used as a 'carrier' to deliver other medicines by making them taste better.

### Fun facts

Solid chocolate bars for eating were created in 1847 by the English company J. S. Fry and Sons.

It is claimed that The Aztec emperor Montezuma II drank more than 50 cups of his drinking chocolate every day.

In the 1660s, Charles II tried to close down the coffee shops, where chocolate was drunk. Radicals and intellectuals would meet there, and the King feared they might start a rebellion against the monarchy.

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BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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