

Did You Know?



Theobroma cacao Cacao

- The cacao or cocoa tree is a tropical tree native to Central and South America rainforests, where it grows in the understory.
- The Latin name for the genus *Theobroma* means “food of the gods”.
- The tiny flowers develop in clusters along the trunk of the tree and once pollinated, develop into very large fruits.
- The fruits, also known as a cacao pod, range in color from red, yellow, purple to brown. 20 to 60 seeds, or cacao beans, are contained in each pod, which are then dried and fermented in the sun.
- Once fermented, the seeds are roasted, cracked and ground to produce a paste called mass. Fat is expressed from the mass, producing solids and butter. The solids are further ground, blended, and finally tempered to produce the smooth chocolate or ground and blended into cocoa powder.
- Cocoa butter, cocoa solids, chocolate liquor and chocolate are all made from cacao beans.
- A cacao tree typically produces about 40 pods annually. Seven to 14 cacao pods are needed to produce one pound of dry cacao beans. And, about 400 cacao beans are required to make one pound of chocolate.
- Many differentiate cacao as referring to the plant and products made from non-roasted seeds. This includes a cacao powder made by cold pressing non-roasted beans. Cocoa usually refers to products made from roasted seeds, and includes the hot drink made from cocoa powder as well as products made from cocoa butter.
- Africa grows the majority of the cacao grown today.
- It is estimated that the Mayan civilization in Mexico and Central America first cultivated the Cacao tree in 250 to 900 CE, though it is likely that it has been consumed by humans since 600 to 200 BCE.
- Cacao beans were used as currency during the Aztec Empire. Drinking the hot beverage was reserved for nobility, though chocolate was included in the rations of the warriors. It was drunk for health benefits and to reduce fatigue.
- Cacao beans are bitter and the hot chocolate drunk by the Aztecs included ground chile powder, honey, a couple of native flowers, and “black flower” which was vanilla (so called due to the color of the pod).

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- Montezuma, the Aztec Emperor, is reported to have consumed 50 goblets of hot chocolate daily. Otherwise, it was often drunk after a banquet.
- Cacao beans were brought to Spain in 1528, following the Spanish conquest. It was not universally liked, but the recipe for chocolate evolved over time to include sugar, vanilla, cinnamon and other flavors to tame the bitterness.
- Historically, from the time it was introduced to Europe, cacao was prescribed for medicinal uses. The many uses included anemia, alopecia, fever, gout, heart disease, kidney and liver disease and tuberculosis.
- Today, cacao is considered a “superfood” due to more than 300 nutrients, phytonutrients and flavonoids.
- Mood elevating properties of chocolate are thought to be due to the theobromine, caffeine, and other compounds that create feelings of alertness and euphoria.
- Cocoa butter is used to moisturize and improve skin health.