

Medieval Chocolate

Written by Miriam Staples 2012 (updated Jan 2013)

The natives to the Americas have had a very long history of chocolate, but Europeans first heard about it from Christopher Columbus. In his fourth and final trip to America in 1502, he is given what he calls “almonds”, made into a drink which he and his sailors despised. It was Hernando Cortez, in 1519, who realised the appeal of the bean and set up cocoa and sugar cane plantations using the natives and Africans as slave labour.

The natives drank the drink unsweetened with many spices such as annatto, chilli and black pepper. It was also served foaming, which the Spanish hated. However, the Spanish loved the drink itself and the traditional belief is that the nuns of Oaxaca created a chocolate drink that was pleasing to the Spanish sweet tooth, using the sugar cane originally planted by Columbus himself on his second trip. For a more European flavour, cinnamon, aniseed and nutmeg were also added to the drink. The first processing plant was set up in 1580 and the secrets of the processing held by Jesuit priests, so the secrets came out over a hundred years later.

The process was described in 1701. The beans were roasted, de-husked and ground, leaving the cocoa mass (or liquor). This was then further ground with chilli, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, black pepper, anise and cloves. It was then moulded into blocks and shipped over the world. In Europe the blocks were melted in boiling pots of water, kept simmering all day. Following is a redacted recipe.

Ingredients

3 cups water

150g of dark chocolate, minimum 60% preferably 85%

1-2 star anise

5 cloves

1 vanilla bean or 1 teaspoon vanilla bean paste

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon dried chilli (or to taste)

3-4 tablespoons of raw sugar (best to add less at first then more to taste)

½ teaspoon annatto (optional as ingredient is hard to get at the local)

¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

Method

Boil the water. Place spices and sugar in boiling water. Then break chocolate into water. Seethe until all chocolate is dissolved. Strain into cups.

Notes

This is but a small history of chocolate. I also cheat by using Lindt dark chocolate with chilli. These means that the chocolate has already been adjusted to taste with sugar, vanilla & chilli.

Reference books-

“Chocolate: Cooking with the world’s best ingredient”

McFadden, C & France, C. Publisher: Ultimate Editions, 2000.

ISBN: 1843090686

“The Book of Chocolate”

Bailleux, N., Publisher: Flammarion, 2001.

ISBN: 2080135880

“Vanilla: Travels in search of the luscious substance”

Ecott, T. Publisher: Michael Joseph, 2004.

ISBN: 0718145895

Websites-

Viewed January 2013

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cane_sugar

<http://athenapub.com/chocolat.htm>

<http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/biomed/spice/index.cfm?displayID=27>

Articles-

“Sir Hans Sloane's Milk Chocolate and the Whole History of the Cacao” by James Delbourgo. Jstor article- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23027357>

“Food of the Gods as Mortals' Medicine: The Uses of Chocolate and Cacao Products” by Martha Makra Graziano. Jstor article- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41111898>

“Frontier Foods for Late Medieval Consumers: Culture, Economy, Ecology” by Richard C. Hoffmann. Jstor article- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723174>

“Like Water for Chocolate: Feasting and Political Ritual among the Late Classic Maya at Xunantunich, Belize” by Lisa J. LeCount. Jstor article- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684122>

“Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics” by Marcy Norton. Jstor article- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/ahr.111.3.660>