

# The History of Chocolate

## From Ancient Medicine to Modern Treat

A 4,000-year journey from bitter jungle drink to the world's favourite sweet

■ B1 Reading ■ 30 min ■ Everyday Life

<b>Level</b>	B1 (Intermediate)
<b>Skill</b>	Reading
<b>Topic</b>	Everyday Life
<b>Duration</b>	30 minutes
<b>Age Group</b>	Teens & Adults

### Learning Objectives

- ◆ Read and understand a text about the 4,000-year history of chocolate
- ◆ Learn 15 key vocabulary items related to history, food, and trade
- ◆ Trace the journey of chocolate from ancient drink to modern product
- ◆ Discuss ethical issues in the global food industry
- ◆ Write about the history and significance of a favourite food

## 1 Before You Read — Chocolate Talk

Think about chocolate and discuss these questions:

1. How often do you eat chocolate? What is your favourite type?
2. Do you know where chocolate comes from? Which countries produce it?
3. Do you think of chocolate as a healthy food, an unhealthy food, or something in between?

## 2 Reading: The Sweet Story of Chocolate

### The Sweet Story of Chocolate

Chocolate is one of the most beloved foods on Earth. Every year, the world consumes over seven million tonnes of it, worth more than 130 billion dollars. We eat it as bars, drink it as hot cocoa, bake it into cakes, and give it as gifts on special occasions. But the sweet, creamy chocolate we know today is very different from the **bitter** drink that ancient civilisations consumed thousands of years ago. The history of chocolate is a fascinating story of **transformation**, trade, and human ingenuity.

### The Food of the Gods

The story of chocolate begins in the tropical rainforests of Central America, where the **cacao** tree has grown for thousands of years. The ancient Maya, who lived in present-day Mexico and Guatemala around 2,000 years ago, were among the first people to cultivate cacao beans. They ground the beans into a paste, mixed it with water, chilli peppers, and cornmeal, and drank it as a thick, frothy, **unsweetened** beverage. For the Maya, this drink was sacred — it was consumed during religious ceremonies, weddings, and funerals.

The Aztecs, who rose to power several centuries later, valued cacao even more highly. They called their chocolate drink *xocolatl* — meaning "bitter water" — and believed it was a gift from the gods. Cacao beans were so **precious** that the Aztecs used them as **currency**: ten beans could buy a rabbit, and a hundred beans could buy a slave. The Aztec emperor Montezuma reportedly drank fifty cups of *xocolatl* every day from a golden goblet.

## Chocolate Arrives in Europe

When Spanish **explorers** arrived in Mexico in the early 1500s, they encountered this strange dark drink and brought it back to Spain. At first, Europeans found the bitter taste unpleasant. But then someone had a revolutionary idea: add sugar. This simple change transformed chocolate from a bitter medicine into a luxurious **delicacy** that quickly became fashionable among the wealthy classes of Spain, France, and Italy.

For the next two centuries, chocolate remained an expensive drink enjoyed only by the **elite**. "Chocolate houses" appeared in London, Paris, and Amsterdam, where aristocrats and intellectuals gathered to sip hot chocolate and discuss politics and philosophy. But ordinary people could not afford this exotic luxury — a single cup of chocolate cost more than a day's wages for a typical worker.

## The Industrial Revolution Changes Everything

Everything changed in the 1800s. In 1828, a Dutch chemist invented a process to separate cocoa butter from the bean, creating a smooth cocoa powder that dissolved easily in milk. In 1847, a British company produced the first solid chocolate bar. And in 1875, a Swiss manufacturer added **condensed** milk to chocolate, creating the smooth, creamy milk chocolate that billions of people enjoy today.

These **innovations** — combined with the mass production techniques of the Industrial Revolution — made chocolate affordable for the first time. What had been a luxury for kings and queens was now available to factory workers, schoolchildren, and families. Chocolate became one of the first truly **global** consumer products, sold on every continent and loved by every culture.

## The Dark Side of Chocolate

Behind the sweet wrapper, however, there is a more troubling story. Approximately 70 percent of the world's cocoa is grown in West Africa, particularly in Ghana and Ivory Coast, where many farmers earn less than two dollars per day. Reports of child labour on cocoa farms have raised serious **ethical** concerns. Major chocolate companies have faced pressure to ensure that their supply chains are free from **exploitation**, and the "fair trade" movement has grown rapidly in response.

Today, consumers are increasingly aware of these issues. Many people choose to buy fair trade or **organic** chocolate, which guarantees that farmers receive a fair price for their beans and that no harmful chemicals are used in production. Some companies are going even further, working directly with farming communities to build schools, improve healthcare, and invest in sustainable agriculture.

From the sacred temples of the Maya to the supermarket shelves of the modern world, chocolate has had an extraordinary journey. Its story reminds us that even the simplest pleasures can have a complex and sometimes uncomfortable history — and that the choices we make as consumers have the power to shape a better future.

### 3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>bitter</b>	having a strong, sharp taste that is not sweet	The original Aztec chocolate drink was extremely bitter.
<b>transformation</b>	a complete change in form, appearance, or character	The transformation of chocolate from medicine to treat took centuries.
<b>cacao</b>	the tropical tree whose seeds are used to make chocolate	Cacao trees grow naturally in Central and South American forests.
<b>unsweetened</b>	without any added sugar	Ancient chocolate was an unsweetened drink mixed with chilli peppers.
<b>precious</b>	of great value; extremely important or rare	Cacao beans were so precious that Aztecs used them as money.
<b>currency</b>	a system of money used in a particular country	Cacao beans served as currency in the Aztec empire.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
<b>explorers</b>	people who travel to unknown places to discover new things	Spanish explorers brought chocolate from Mexico to Europe.
<b>delicacy</b>	a food considered rare, expensive, or especially delicious	Chocolate quickly became a prized delicacy among European nobility.
<b>elite</b>	a small group of powerful or wealthy people in society	For centuries, chocolate was a drink for the elite only.
<b>condensed</b>	made thicker by removing water; concentrated	Adding condensed milk created the smooth milk chocolate we know.
<b>innovations</b>	new ideas, methods, or inventions	Several key innovations in the 1800s made chocolate affordable.
<b>global</b>	relating to the whole world; worldwide	Chocolate became one of the first truly global consumer products.
<b>ethical</b>	relating to moral principles of right and wrong behaviour	Child labour on cocoa farms raises serious ethical concerns.
<b>exploitation</b>	treating someone unfairly to benefit from their work	Fair trade aims to prevent the exploitation of cocoa farmers.
<b>organic</b>	produced without artificial chemicals or pesticides	Many people now choose organic chocolate for health and ethics.

## 4 Useful Collocations

cocoa beans · dark chocolate · milk chocolate · hot cocoa · chocolate bar · fair trade · child labour · mass production · supply chain · consumer product · industrial revolution · raw material · luxury goods · ancient civilisation · cultural heritage · trade route

## 5 Reading Comprehension

### 1. How did the ancient Maya consume chocolate?

- a) As solid bars with sugar
- b) As a sweet milk drink
- c) As a bitter, unsweetened drink with chilli and cornmeal ✓**
- d) As a frozen dessert

**2. Why were cacao beans valuable to the Aztecs?**

- a) Because they were used as medicine only
- b) Because they were used as currency — money ✓**
- c) Because they were extremely rare in Mexico
- d) Because the emperor banned everyone else from having them

**3. How was chocolate first made popular in Europe?**

- a) By adding milk and cream
- b) By adding sugar to the bitter drink ✓**
- c) By serving it as a solid bar
- d) By mixing it with coffee

**4. What invention in 1828 changed chocolate production?**

- a) The chocolate mould
- b) The chocolate fountain
- c) A process to separate cocoa butter, creating smooth powder ✓**
- d) The first chocolate factory

**5. Where is most of the world's cocoa grown today?**

- a) South America
- b) Southeast Asia
- c) West Africa ✓**
- d) Central America

**6. What does 'fair trade' chocolate guarantee?**

- a) That the chocolate tastes better
- b) That farmers receive a fair price and no exploitation occurs ✓**
- c) That the chocolate is 100% organic
- d) That it is produced in Europe

**6 Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

Complete the sentences with the correct word from the box:

**bitter · transformation · currency · innovations · elite · exploitation · precious · organic**

1. The original Aztec chocolate drink was dark and extremely \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The \_\_\_\_\_ of chocolate from medicine to sweet treat took several centuries.

3. Cacao beans were used as \_\_\_\_\_ in the Aztec empire — like money.
4. Several key \_\_\_\_\_ in the 1800s made chocolate cheap enough for everyone.
5. For two hundred years, chocolate was a luxury enjoyed only by the \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Fair trade certification helps prevent the \_\_\_\_\_ of cocoa farmers.
7. Cacao beans were considered so \_\_\_\_\_ that they were offered to the gods.
8. Many consumers now prefer \_\_\_\_\_ chocolate, made without artificial chemicals.

## 7 Answer Key

### ■ Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. bitter
2. transformation
3. currency
4. innovations
5. elite
6. exploitation
7. precious
8. organic

## 8 Speaking & Writing Tasks

### ■ ■ Speaking Task: Discussion

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Were you surprised by any facts in this text? Which ones?
- Do you think consumers should pay more for fair trade chocolate? Why or why not?
- How important is it to know the history of the food we eat?
- If you could go back in time and try Aztec xocolatl, would you? Why or why not?

### ■ Useful Phrases for Talking About History

- **This dates back to** the ancient Maya civilisation, over 2,000 years ago.
- **It was not until** the 1800s that chocolate became affordable for ordinary people.
- **What changed everything was** the invention of a way to separate cocoa butter.
- **Originally**, chocolate was a bitter drink, not a sweet treat.
- **Over time**, chocolate transformed from a sacred drink into a global consumer product.

 **Writing Task: The Story Behind My Favourite Food**

Write a paragraph (120–160 words) about this topic:

**"Choose a food or drink you love. What do you know about its history? Where does it come from? How has it changed over time? Why do you enjoy it?"**

Use vocabulary from this lesson where possible. Include historical facts if you know them, and explain why this food is special to you.