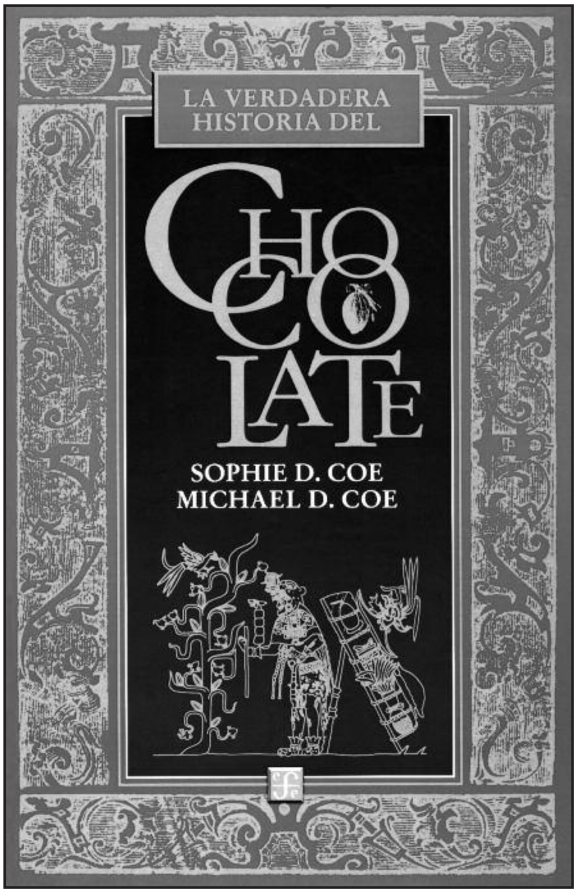
Reviews



La verdadera historia del chocolate
(The True History of Chocolate)
Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe
Fondo de Cultura Económica
Mexico City, 1999, 396 pp.

The ancient Maya drank it hot, mixed with different flavorings like chili peppers and vanilla; the much-coveted foam was produced by pouring the liquid from one recipient to another. With the Mexicas, the flavors of chocolate diversified. Sahagún tells us of chocolate flavored with chili peppers, vanilla flowers, *huitztecolli* flowers; there was brilliant red chocolate, white chocolate and black chocolate, all tinted with flowers. It could also be prepared with black *zapote* seeds or with corn. It was usually drunk cold. After their arrival in Mexico, the Spaniards —especially the women— became fervent addicts. English traveler Thomas Gage, who was in San Cristóbal de las Casas around 1629, relates how the most important ladies of the town could barely sit through mass and the sermon at the cathedral and that, to help them through the long service, they would send for foamy little cups of chocolate and plates of sweets. When the bishop threatened to excommunicate them if they continued to eat and drink in the house of God, the feisty criollas went to hear mass at other churches and the cathedral stood empty. A short time later the over-conscientious bishop became ill and died; he had drunk chocolate laced with a slow poison (the strong flavor of the chocolate masked the flavor of the poison). The most extraordinary excesses of chocolate came about, however, in the Old World, when the novel drink took hold of the European courts and elites. The notorious Marquis de Sade, protagonist of so many other excesses, had to live up to his reputation when it came to chocolate. Gossip mongers say that during a party in Marseilles, the marquis mixed chocolate and Spanish-fly in a dessert. When it took effect, the entire evening became a fantastic orgy; the most upright found themselves prisoners of "the most amorous frenzy," and the most respectable women were "incapable of resisting the uterine furor." The marquis himself, who spent more than 30 years of his life in different prisons, was a great chocolate addict and repeatedly asked for tablets, wafers and cakes "as black from chocolate as the Devil's ass is from smoke."

These are only some of the most famous episodes of *La verdadera historia del chocolate* (a title which alludes to Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* [The True History of the Conquest of New Spain]). The book, begun by Sophie D. Coe, who did most of the research, was finished after her death by Michael D. Coe, the renowned Mayanist. Perhaps Michael's part in the book explains some of the generalizations, at times superficial, that tend to present the Europeans in an unfavorable light vis-à-vis the indigenous peoples: the book talks of Felipe II's fanaticism; the "silliness" of Western medicine, particularly the theories of humors; and Oviedo's contempt for the indigenous. But these slips do not overshadow the book's merits.

It is a history of chocolate crossed by several parallel histories: the conquest of Mexico by the Europeans, but also the conquest of Mexico by Europe, particularly through its plants and fruit; the economic relations among four continents (Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa) manifest in the exchange of slaves, spices and raw materials; European medicine, with its myths, beliefs and confusions; the social, cultural and political meaning of fashions in food; the links between the culture of the elite and the culture of the masses. Chocolate is always the protagonist of the book and the story is told through its captivating adventures. The result is an enjoyable, seductive read, that at the same time opens up roads for future exploration.

The story starts in Mexico and Central America, where the cacao tree originated. Even the scientific name of the cacao tree, *Theobroma cacao* (thus named by Lineus in the eighteenth century), implies its destiny as the representative of the meeting of two worlds. The first part of the name, *theobroma*, is from the Greek, meaning "food of the gods." The second part, *cacao*, seems to be the Maya word, *kakaw*. After this etymological digression —of which there are several in the book— Sophie and Michael introduce the different varieties of cacao trees. There are external and native cacao trees: the former are more resistent and account for 80 percent of today's international cacao crop. The criolla variety produces a superior flavor and aroma and is still used to make the best, deluxe chocolates. The criolla variety was the one used mainly among the Maya and the Mexica, or rather, among their elites: chocolate was a luxury. Therefore, among the Mexica, only the members of the royal household, warriors and the upper merchant class enjoyed it. To this high social value corresponded a high monetary value: cacao beans were used as currency and, according to Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, Moctezuma's royal treasury held more than 40,000 measures, or 960 million cacao beans. During the colonial period, cacao continued to be used as currency and some cases of counterfeiting were even registered.

After its arrival in Europe, chocolate continued for a long time to be a luxury beverage destined only for the upper class. But, before it became more popularly consumed, it went through a period in which it was rejected and adapted; it had to overcome three major barriers: the barrier of taste and ecclesiastic and medical objections. The first European tales about chocolate describe it as a repugnant drink that brought to mind the human sacrifices so abominable to the conquistadors. Oviedo watched in horror as the natives drank chocolate flavored with *achiote*, a paste made of different chili peppers, that stained the lips and mouth red as though they had drunk blood. Soon, with the mingling of the two cultures (and above all the assimilation by the Spanish women of the indigenous women's customs), chocolate, like so many other native products, won the acceptance of the Europeans. At the same time, the use of spices familiar to the European palate like cinnamon, anise and black pepper in making chocolate contributed to its crossing the taste barrier.

To overcome the medical barrier, chocolate had to open up a favorable space for itself in the theory of the humors that, with certain variations, ruled Western medicine from the time of Hippocrates until the eighteenth century. According to the theory of the humors, food (as well as human beings or places) were classified in four categories (warm, cold, humid and dry, which had little to do with today's concepts of hot or cold). Health was due to the equilibrium of the four humors in the body (black bile, blood, phlegm and yellow bile) and illness came about when one of the humors prevailed over the others. In that case, the rebellious humor had to be countered with its opposite: a hot disease was attacked with cold foods. In this repertory, cacao was cold and humid, even if, when prepared as chocolate with the addition of spices, the final result was hot. Among the main medicinal uses of chocolate was for the relief of constipation (the Spaniards, great consumers of meat, were in serious need of laxatives) and its supposed aphrodisiac properties. Therefore, initially, chocolate crossed the Atlantic as a medicine.

By the seventeenth century, the non-medical consumption of chocolate had spread so much in the religious community that it was the subject of serious theological debates. The dispute, in which much ink was spilled, could be reduced to whether chocolate broke the ecclesiastic fast or not. The Jesuits, devotees and traders in chocolate, insisted that it did not break the fast; the Dominicans, always more abstemious, argued that it did. A story from the Florentine Giovanni Batista Gudenfredi offers an ingenious truce for the debate in 1680: during her arduous penitence, when she was at the point of physical collapse, Saint Rosa of Lima (the first saint of the Americas and a Dominican!) was visited by a benevolent angel who invited her to a frothy cup of chocolate. Rosa recovered her strength and went back to her devotions.

Once all objections had been overcome, chocolate met with little resistance and, one by one, conquered the courts of Europe. During the baroque period, it became extremely sophisticated: more and more elaborate recipes were invented; special serving dishes were developed (*mancerinas* and *chocolatières*), as well as rituals for drinking it. Its cultural and political space with regard to other stimulants like coffee and tea was also beginning to develop. Chocolate was associated with Catholic, absolutist regimes, while tea and coffee began to represent the Protestant culture. It was not until the nineteenth century that new manufacturing processes democratized chocolate. Parallel to this, solid chocolate began to be popular. This is the time of the benevolent chocolate dictators, like the famous American Milton S. Hershey, the Henry Ford of chocolate manufacturers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hershey created a model town —surprisingly enough, named Hershey— near Philadelphia. A utopia dedicated to chocolate production, the town was organized around a central factory, “the heartbeat of the community,” crisscrossed by two main avenues, Chocolate and Cacao, with five churches, a Hershey zoo, Hershey bank and Hershey hotel. The town is still visited by thousands every year, and other large chocolate producers have followed this Disneyland-like inspiration by opening their own theme parks. These captivating manifestations of a new chocolate cult may make a bag of Hershey’s Kisses seem sickly sweet. And then again, they may not. Meanwhile, a no lesser delight is this book by Sophie and Michael D. Coe.

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