



Before the discovery of the New World, the ancient Mexicans living in the valley where nowadays lies Mexico City, could assist every year at an extraordinary spectacle. At first the hills became covered with white and rosy flowers and then were speckled with red fruits similar to big nuts, hanging down from the trunks of big leafy trees. The Mexicans called these plants "cacahuatl", and they used the same name for the drink that they extracted by milling the seeds contained in these nuts: the cocoa beans.

Historians say that those plants, which once were wild and native of the plateau, were cultivated for the first time by the Maya, a people of farmers whose civilization flourished in the Yucatàn peninsula around 200 a.D.: more than one thousand years before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores. The cocoa beans became more and more important for the Maya: from them they could obtain a "miraculous" drink, rich in nutritive substances and having many properties stimulating cerebral and physical activity. A single cup of this drink allowed a man to walk for a whole day without eating anything else. This drink was chocolate. Of course, the importance given to chocolate also had a mythological justification: cocoa was considered the food of God Opossum and God Chac (the god of rain). Therefore, like ambrosia for ancient Greeks, chocolate was the drink served at the Gods' banquets; which was consumed by the aristocracy both by the Maya and by the Aztec populations in order to savour the celestial taste of immortality. It is not a case that the scientific name of the plant is *Teobroma Cacao*, which in Greek means "food of the Gods".

However, cocoa was not "only" this: thanks to its importance, the cocoa beans acquired a monetary value: they had exchange value in markets, were used to redeem war prisoners, and were appreciated wedding gifts.

When cocoa beans reached Europe and cooks learnt to prepare the drink, chocolate spread itself only among the Spanish aristocracy.

The drink made its appearance at the French court only in 1660, when Maria Teresa, the Spanish Infanta, married the Sun King, Louis XIV, and brought with her the cups and the service needed to prepare chocolate, as she had learned at the Spanish court. The French ceramists were even given the task to create cups, chocolate pots and every other necessary object in order to serve chocolate. Therefore, at the beginning, chocolate was a nourishment for few, so that among the people cultivating this rite - as drinking hot chocolate was a real rite- it was possible to include the Cardinals Richelieu and Mazzarino, as well as the members of the royal families of France, Spain and of other European countries. However, the biggest

merchants of cocoa beans in the world were the Dutch; it has even been argued that they wanted cocoa beans as a payment for the slaves they captured in Africa and sold in the Caribbean islands. This fact particularly bothered the German merchants, who considered it "vulgar" to market the seeds used to obtain a food for princes and kings. Actually, for the preparation of chocolate an expert hand was needed, not a noble one; thus Spanish specialized maids according to the vogue usually prepared the drink. And since even the drinker could be "commoner", a clientele of worldly and frivolous spirits, of "sine nobilitate" cocoa's affectionate lovers raised.

It was so that the first public cafés began their activity. Here it was possible to order steaming chocolate cups; here gathered all those who wanted to imitate noble and rich people, drinking hot chocolate and talking about the main events. Between the 16th and the 17th century the exquisite taste of chocolate - at that time consumed only in its liquid form - took root in the custom of every class, so that even the clergymen used to drink it. However the problem was posed if chocolate could be drunk during Lent and fast. The question was submitted to the Pope, who declared that "a cup of chocolate does not break fast".

At the end of the 18th century, when drinking hot chocolate was in vogue, Mrs. Teresina Majani opened in the heart of Bologna a laboratory for "sweet things" which was destined to become the core of the most ancient confectionery industry in Italy. This pastry shop, born under the banner of modernity, offered to the young Bolognese ladies sugared almonds and rosolio of every sort, but above all, it offered them that hot chocolate symbol of luxury and excellence for all European courts.

In that period the most important Italian cocoa productions were in Turin, and it was a consequence of the Napoleonic conquest that one of the most important innovation in the chocolate field could see the light. In fact, Napoleon had imposed a block, which prevented the importing of cocoa seeds; therefore in 1806 the well-known "Gianduaia" paste was invented in Turin, by mixing the little available cocoa paste with hazels and other ingredients. But still it was too early for chocolate in solid form; the first "chocolate to crunch" was the "Scorza Chocolate", so called because of its typical shape which let it look like a piece of tree rind, created by the same Mrs. Majani in 1832 and still produced nowadays according to that old recipe. The 19th century was a sequence of inventions and successes in the field of cocoa working, so that even today these choices characterize the whole chocolate production. In 1828 Conraad Van Houten invented a press extracting cocoa butter from the paste obtained from beans grinding, thus patenting cocoa powder. In 1875, Swiss Daniel Peter manufactured the first milk chocolate, thanks to the process of milk condensation invented by his fellow countryman Henri Nestlé. In 1879 Rodolphe Lind established a system for chocolate working, which allowed the industrial production of dark chocolate.

Chocolate as food; cocoa processing

The cocoa tree is a very delicate plant, which needs continuous care and which is grown by the farmers sheltered by gigantic trees to protect it. The plant does not grow nor yield outside the inter-tropical belt located between 20 degrees north and 20 degrees south from the Equator and outside a hot and humid climate.

The plant is caulocarpic, which means that it has a particular way of blossoming where almost all flowers and fruits grow only on the trunk. This characteristic puzzled the Spanish, who sometimes tried to "correct" the drawings and the engravings by painting its flowers and fruits on little branches. The fruits are like big nuts, which contain cocoa beans dipped in a whitish

pulp; in turn the seed and its protective peel compose the beans.

When they are harvested, the beans are left to ferment for a few days so that the peel comes off from the seed. After that, the beans are exsiccated, packed in sacks and sold. The beans processing ends with roasting, which give to cocoa that typical aroma, we are used to.

What does cocoa contain

The well-known naturalist and scientist Alexander Von Humboldt said: "the cocoa bean is a phenomenon that nature never repeated. There have never been so many qualities all together in such a little fruit". Numerous researchers, both old and modern, have demonstrated that cocoa is a rich and complete food, which assures a considerable contribution of calories, which can be easily assimilated, as well as substances, which stimulate the nervous system.

At least half the weight of a treated cocoa seed is constituted by cocoa butter. Further than cocoa butter, every cocoa seed has less than 10% proteins and starch, plus many other components: glicides, cellulose and mineral salts, as well as caffeine, theobromine, serotonin and feniletamine which are tonic agents and antidepressants, able to reduce tiredness and to increase the activity of our organism, as the Maya and the Aztec populations well knew.

What is chocolate

From the grinded cocoa seeds a fluid paste is extracted which, if pressed when it is hot, loose about half of its fats: this fat substance is cocoa butter, while the rest is cocoa powder.

Chocolate is a mix of cocoa paste or powder, sugar and cocoa butter. This simple recipe can be used for an incredible variety of applications. However, all of them can be brought back to some general types of chocolate, differentiated by their working process only:

Hot chocolate

This is the oldest way to consume chocolate. For around three thousand years and until the beginning of the last century the preparation has remained substantially the same: the cocoa paste was diluted in water or milk, then whipped with an instrument called "milinillo" (eggbeater) and finally it was boiled.

On the other hand, nowadays cocoa powder is used, mixed with water or milk, to which proper thickening additives are added.

Plain dark chocolate

The Italian name "fondente" ("melting") indicates a chocolate which, when eaten, easily melts without giving a feeling of granularity. It is obtained through the long processing called "conching" - because of the use of a conche - used at the end of the past century. In order to obtain a solid form, cocoa paste is mixed with melted cocoa butter and sugar.

Modern chocolate is always dark, but according to the variety of cocoa used there are different types of chocolates. Important differences can be found also as far as cocoa quality is concerned: like for coffee, there are better and worse cocoa blends, according to the production area. What makes a good chocolate is the expert mix of different cocoas.

Milk chocolate

This chocolate is made with the same basic ingredients of dark chocolate, plus an addition of powdered or condensed milk. Among the different sorts of milk chocolate, Gianduia must be cited. It replaces condensed milk with a refined cream of roasted hazels.

White chocolate

This is the easiest variation on the basic recipe, a mix of cocoa butter and powdered milk.

"Scorza" chocolate

The "Scorza" is the first and most ancient form of solid chocolate. From the formal point of view, it is an extra dark chocolate, but its distinctive characteristic is to be an "integral" chocolate. That means that, together with an accurate choice of excellent cocoas, it still follows the ancient traditions, where chocolate is produced through a special processing with granite grindstones. The chocolate so obtained results exceptionally friable, and is very appreciated by connoisseurs.

All the different chocolate kinds are food suitable for young people and for those who practise sport or heavy and tiring works, thus needing energy. For the same reasons, Nasa as one of the fundamental foods for cosmonauts has recently chosen chocolate. Moreover, it should not be forgotten the positive excitant action that theobromine and caffeine have. Maybe the cook who once said that "chocolate serves for those witty men which feel temporarily stupid", was right.

BANCHA

Japanese green tea, Bancha undergoes a processing called t: this is a steaming process which differs from traditional fermentation of black teas in that it maintains unaltered the plant's healthy proprieties. The picked leaves are the most adults of the plant and after processing they appear flat and lanceolate. Their infusion has a light and intense green colour, and its taste is slightly bitter with a typical aftertaste of fresh grass.

CHUM MEE GREEN TEA

Chum Mee green tea (Eyebrow of the Old man) produces an infusion characterized by its clear green colour and by its pure and fresh aroma, with a fruit aftertaste, which reminds of plums. It is also good for mixing with fresh peppermint leaves.

ASSAM TEA

A third of all Indian tea is produced in the Assam valley. Assam, which is among the best black tea in the world, has little, deep brown leaves, with golden tips from the best harvests. The deep red infusion has a strong and marked flavour with a slightly spiced aftertaste.

"PRINCE OF WALES" TEA

This blend, which includes a black tea cultivated in the Chinese province of Anhui, was created in 1921 for the Prince of Wales and has a light and delicate flavour.

VINTAGE DARJEELINGTEA

Truly a tea for the connoisseur who appreciate the delicate fragrance of this brew of very finest Darjeeling. Good tea deserves the very best treatment.

ROOIBOS TEA

Originated in South Africa, Rooibos, inappropriately called red tea, derives from a cultivated

shrub in the southern part of the continent of Africa. From its small leaves, orange and pointed, comes a red brew, without theine and mineral salts, sweet and thirst-quenching.