

Holt WI

Having celebrated the start of autumn last month with a social get together at our President's house, October was launched with a positive cascade of delight. Jackie Smith, a sole trader, of Nova Chocolates came to entertain us with a talk on the history, the science and the health benefits of chocolate plus demonstrations and sales of her wonderful merchandise. It was such a wonderful evening that we are seriously discussing asking her to return for an Open Evening so that we can share the fun (and samples) with more people.

It was about 2000BC that the cacao tree became established in the Amazonian rain forest, but the first record of human consumption of chocolate as a drink can be dated to 1500 years ago, when the Mayan civilization used it as a culinary, medicinal and celebratory beverage. And yes, even then there was a gender divide: only women prepared the drink; only men drank it. The belief was that its strong intoxicating properties were too robust for woman to cope with. Hmm! The Mayans added many of the same flavourings as might be found today: chilli, honey, vanilla, crushed flowers. Cocoa butter was used as a salve for burns, sunburn and rather surprisingly, to ward off snakes. Recent studies of indigenous peoples have proved that cocoa butter is indeed a snake repellent. Cocoa beans were valued more highly than gold, and used as a currency. Spanish explorers recorded that 4 beans would buy a rabbit, 10 a prostitute and 100 a slave.



It was the Spaniards, via a deputation of Mayans, who brought chocolate to Europe, and, although initially a closely guarded secret, eventually its fame spread across the continent and by 1657 the first chocolate shop opened in London, serving tea, coffee and the more exciting chocolate. This fast became the fashionable drink for the wealthy, more expensive than tea and coffee. Antique silver chocolate pots can still be found in museums and the whole process of brewing chocolate has been immortalised in art and poetry, rather like the Japanese tea ceremony.

It took another two centuries to realise that chocolate could also be made into a paste and hardened into block form. First Joseph Fry and later John Cadbury produced a

very high quality product, with Cadbury investing in beautifully designed boxes, advertising material and importantly his staff. Until now, all block chocolate was dark; it took until 1905 for the iconic Dairy Milk to be developed.



So how is chocolate made? Starting with the evergreen cacao tree, which grows only in deep tropical regions, where the temperature must never drop below 15 degrees, the tree needs plenty of rain, very good soil and a humid atmosphere. From approximately 6000 flowers per tree, only about 30 will develop into a pod holding about 20 seeds or beans. The total amount of potential chocolate per tree is therefore small: about 450g.

Harvesting is tricky. The beans need to dry, but any artificial drying may endanger the crop as the beans will absorb external odours, wood smoke or fuel oil perhaps. Thus natural drying is the best if slowest option. Once dry, the beans are factory roasted, ground into a paste (chocolate liquor) and then hardened. At this point you will have what amounts to cooking chocolate. Extract the cocoa butter from that and you would be left with cocoa powder. But for block chocolate, one must take the process from the chocolate liquor stage, add soya, sugar and whatever flavourings are wanted and then conch the whole lot.



Conch? Well, aerate and emulsify. For high quality chocolate, this can take 72 hours, poorer quality only a few hours. So now we know why American chocolate tastes soapy! The final mixture is warmed to make it malleable and then chocolates are formed. Our personal demonstration produced rather special chocolate lollipops.

And what about the health benefits? Numerous university and hospital studies have proven that indeed there are many. For example, chocolate is full of nitric oxide; this dilates the arteries and can help with blood flow, particularly good for warding off heart disease. One ounce of semi-sweet chocolate per day has the same effect as an aspirin. But it is dark chocolate that does the trick, lowering blood pressure, improving the survival rates of heart attack survivors. The anti-oxidant rich nature of chocolate is also good, stopping oxidation in cells that is linked to various cancers and arthritis. A recent study found that two pieces of dark chocolate eaten just before bed can improve or even eliminate a persistent cough. The endorphins released by chocolate encourage a feel good factor and are also linked to improvement in memory, concentration and problem solving. Wow! It is a small regular amount that seems to give the greatest benefit, even adding to longevity. Unfortunately, being a chocolate glutton will do the opposite, of course.

Finally, did you know?

- The volume of Cadbury's Crème Eggs eaten per year would stretch for 12 thousand miles.
- Chocolate was used in the famous murder scene in *Psycho*
- You can get a genuine Death by Chocolate; 22 pounds in one go is lethal.
- Racing horses cannot be given chocolate; it is on the banned drug list.
- In Scotland, there is such a thing as a Fry's Chocolate Cream sandwich.
- 80% of chocolate in the UK is consumed between the hours of 8 pm and midnight.

Well! What an indulgent meeting that was. Of course, all this information was supported with tasting sessions and samples to explain the finer points.

There is plenty more to look forward to this autumn. Holt ladies have been enthusiastically contributing to the river of poppies that will help us commemorate Armistice Day on November 11th. The ACM in Malvern will be getting a healthy contingent from Holt, along with a photo of our vintage banner from the village hall and another type of haul of old jewellery, which is assisting the ACWW charity. A Christmas bauble ready for the Cathedral trees has been completed by a very artistic member and we are looking forward to a coffee morning later this month and Christmas dinner at the beginning of December. At next month's AGM, we will look back over the year that might have seen our demise, but didn't, and look forward to events for 2019 including our 100th birthday. We are always ready to welcome new members and would love to see some in the new year.