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Autor: Felchlin, Suzanne

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MAKE MINE CHOCOLATL!

by

SUZANNE FELCHLIN



If ever an economist writes a history book, this confusing sentence will surely stand under the title Switzerland: "Fernando Cortez was one of the most important explorers for Switzerland." Not of Switzerland, mind you, for Switzerland.

Of course, as any fifth grader knows, Cortez hewed his bloody way through Mexico in the name of Spain. He sought gold for Spain — and found it; heavy nuggets of yellow gold. But he stumbled upon something rich and aromatic — something that turned into brown gold for Switzerland. It was Fernando Cortez who brought chocolate to the European world.

Upon landing in Veracruz in 1519, the grim and determined Conquistadore burnt his ships — to show his 16 cavalry men and 500 foot soldiers that their quest meant either victory or never again a sight of homeland. After his brilliant and gory success, when he again met a Spanish ship, he sent this notice in a letter home: "In the New Land we have discovered a miracle food. When one has eaten of the shell, one can bear up under the rigours of the journey a full day long without other nourishment."

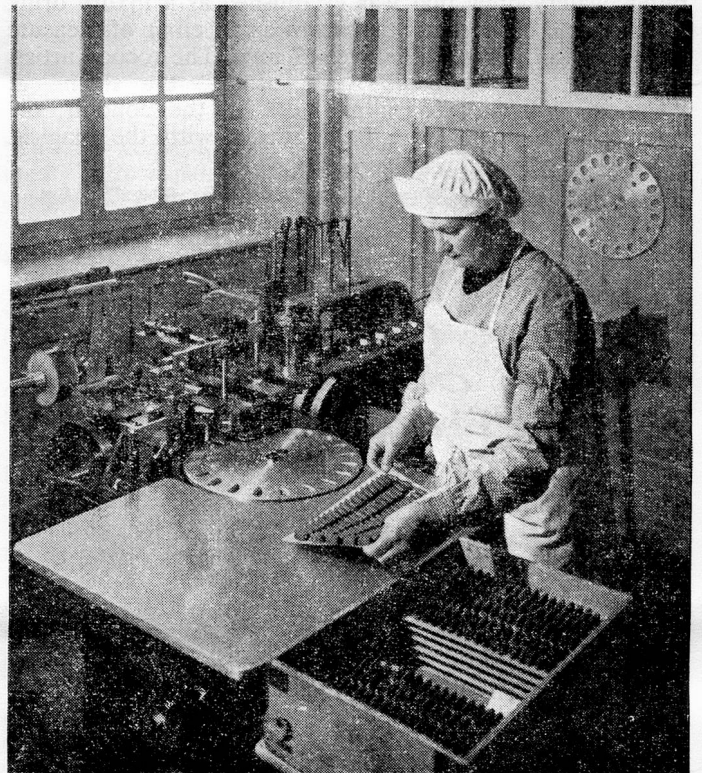
This miracle food of Cortez was the cocoa bean. The Mexicans had long known it and the brew they made from it called "Chocolatl". No drink for apple cheeked children this. It was unsugared, spiced with vanilla and a myriad of other herbs, including pepper. Its name means "bitter water".

The "Cacahuatl" themselves, or cocoa beans, were the currency of the Mexicans. The treasure chambers that Cortez wrenched from King Montezuma were said to have held 25,000 hundredweight of this natural money. A pretty sum, when one reckons that 1000 beans had a value of about \$1.25 in present-day money.

The ancient Mexicans treasured the cocoa bean not only for its nutritional value, but because it was a gift of the gods themselves. The legend is thus: Quetzalcoatl, the god of the silver moonlight and the cooling winds, ruled as king of the Toltecs in the wonderland of Tullan, where they knew not tears or pain or trouble. The Toltecs were immeasurably rich, but their greatest treasure was the cocoa bean which Quetzalcoatl brought from the fields of the eldest son of the Sun. When ill times fell on the Toltecs, they died out. But the wonderful tree lived on. It was ever green and blossoming, it bore all the year round. One hundred of its plentiful fruits were worth a

strong healthy slave. When the race of Aztecs arose to fill the Toltec's place, they, too, worshipped the cocoa bean.

As soon as the first cocoa bean arrived in Europe, in 1520, the furore started. Wise and witty men wrote



(Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office)

This typical Swiss art: chocolate making

passionately for and against it. It was described as "a heavenly nectar" and "a beverage enticing to hell". When the Spanish monks began to make cakes of cocoa powder, the weighty question arose whether chocolate broke the fast or not. The influential Cardinal Brancaccio solved

and absolved the problem with a comforting, "No, chocolate does not break the fast." He even wrote an ode praising the cocoa tree as the "Tree of Trees". However, stern Cardinal Richelieu of France took another view. He condemned the drink as "a drug harmful to the health". Meanwhile, the sober English churchmen debated whether it should not be prohibited to the use of young ecclesiastics.

Not only the church became interested in this wonderful new food. The medical profession recognized its worth at once. Francisco Hernandez of Toledo, following the footsteps of his adventurous countryman, toured Mexico as a doctor, scientifically noting the preparation of cocoa as food and drink. In 1784, Buchet lectured at the Sorbonne, describing cocoa as "one of the greatest acquisitions of mankind". One of the first to value the vast nutritional worth of chocolate was the Dutch court physician, Bontekoe, and in 1717, Johann Kuhne, of Breslau, stated: "It strengthens the stomach, activates the animal spirits, and thins the juices and the blood."

Frederick the Great, however, did not trust all this exotic foolishness. Still, with canny caution, he commissioned the court apothecaries to find a substitute for it out of linden flowers. Nevertheless, less than 200 years after Cortez, chocolate was in Europe to stay, as an indispensable adjunct to high spirits, a pleasure for every hour and the highest delight for pampered palates.

To-day, we would probably refuse to tolerate the bitter, watery brew that was established as a luxury drink of the noble classes. It was known as an elixir of pleasure and a potion to stoke the fires of love. The rococo artists made many a delicious scene around the theme of "Chocolate", with charming ladies in the boudoir, the salon, at the opera or a ball, always with the magical

drink in their dainty hands. Chocolate in those days was fluid, potent and strictly for adults. And the long-ago children couldn't have cared less. Their time was to come.

So long as chocolate was limited as a beverage to noble and frivolous circles, it found no place in democratic, sensible Switzerland. But soon itinerate "Ciocolateri" wandered up from Italy to the Swiss market places. In primitive wooden mills they mixed grated cocoa beans, brown sugar and vanilla to a paste, rolled it into little cigar shapes, and sold them. History has it that the first chocolate in this form came to Switzerland in 1617. In the 18th century, the chocolate of Venice, Turin and Milan was imported to an enthusiastic Switzerland.

It might still be so, had not, one lucky day in 1819, a French-speaking Swiss named François Louis Cailler wandered to a town fair. There he saw such an Italian chocolate-maker at his little stand, and tasted his wares. Cailler thought that with the help of appropriate machines this delicious stuff could be made better, cheaper and more hygienically. He started a little plant in Corsier near Vevey — and the Swiss chocolate business was on its way.

In spite of the difficulties of inventing their own never-heard-of machines, and the problems of import, pioneer name followed upon pioneer name — Suchard, Foulquier, Kohler, Sprüngli, Maestrani, Klaus, Peter, Nestlé, Tobler, Lindt, Pagani, Kaiser — and improvement upon improvement: mixing, kneading, sugar milling, condensation of milk and its blending with chocolate, addition of cocoa butter for finer melting, the step to making bars, the addition of flavours, nuts, honey, etc. Constant attention to quality, constant striving to improve, piled up to the towering reputation that Switzerland's chocolate and its chocolate makers have now achieved.

It is interesting to note that Switzerland, a country with a reputation for modest, thrifty living habits, though of a high standard, has the highest per capita consumption of chocolate. The wise old Swiss pioneers realized what the Mexicans had known in their simple way. Chocolate is not only an elixir of love, and a "snob-appeal" food. It is as good for you as it is good. Alexander von Humboldt said, "The cocoa bean is a phenomenon, for in no other form has nature packed such a wealth of valuable nutrition in so small a space." The most important factor in chocolate is the theobromin. It excites the activity of the nervous system and digestion, increases bodily performance, and helps the mental worker over "tired spells" without curtailing sleep. Children profit from theobromin as well, without any ill effects, except perhaps sticky fingers. No wonder one gives children, convalescents and delicate people chocolate. No wonder so many medications are embedded deep in sweet chocolate, and most of the health foods and drinks are based upon cocoa. Chocolate belongs in the knapsacks of hunters, skiers, and hikers. Every combat soldier's rations include this delicious nourishment. Athletes thrive on it, and it is one of the world's best pick-me-ups for the tired housewife.

So, be it chocolate Easter bunny, or Christmas bonbon, a foaming hot chocolate, or a firm fine candy bar, the next time chocolate delights the tongue, give three thanks — to old Quetzalcoatl for bringing the seeds from the sun, to wicked Cortez for bringing them to Europe, and to the patient, productive Swiss pioneers who gave back to the people the pleasure and goodness of the "food of the gods".

