



# Chocolates of the World

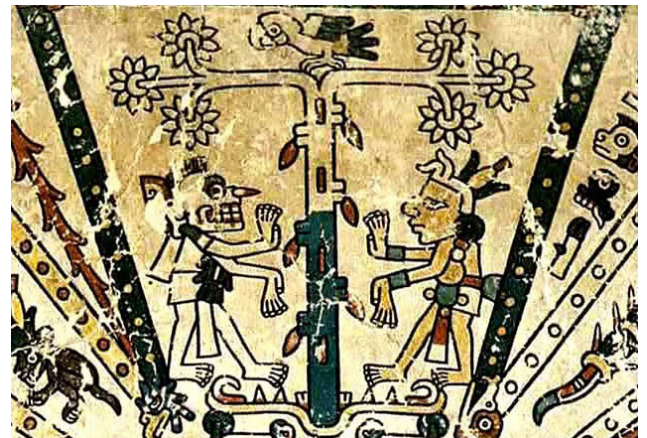
## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

**Lead your students in a chocolate tasting. This experiential activity will help introduce culture, language, history, food, and geography in a fun, engaging and interactive way.**

## THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF CHOCOLATE

**C**hocolate has been around for about 2000 years, maybe much longer, but not in the form that we know and love today. It started as a somewhat bitter drink in South and Central America, where cocoa beans are a native plant. The Aztecs and Mayans believed that the beans had magical and even divine powers, and so they were often included in ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death. When Spanish explorers arrived, they found the drink too bitter. However, they eventually discovered that adding honey or cane sugar made it taste much better.

They took this sweetened beverage back to Europe where it became a fashionable drink for the wealthy by the 17th century. In 1828 a Dutch chemist invented the process for turning the drink into solid chocolate, or “Dutch cocoa”, and in 1847 the first chocolate bar was created. By the late 1800s both Cadbury and Nestle were selling boxes of chocolates in England. Today chocolate is more popular than ever, with Americans consuming on average 11 pounds per capita per year. However, that’s less than half the amount consumed by Europeans, who eat over 24 pounds per person per year. So don’t worry that you won’t be able to find chocolate when traveling. It turns out that the taste for chocolate is very international.



*Fejérváry-Mayer Codex—Close-up of cacao tree glyph.*

Chocolate is made from cocoa beans which grow on cacao trees. Cacao trees thrive within a limited geographical zone of approximately 20 degrees to the north or south of the equator. Nearly 70% of the world crop is grown in West Africa. When we talk about chocolate from Spain, France, Belgium and Germany we are talking about the countries where the chocolate is processed and turned into chocolate confections. Historically, West Africa and Latin America have exported the cacao beans for European production, but over the past 20 years, artisans dedicated to producing chocolate confections within their home countries such as Guatemala and Costa Rica have flourished.

The business of chocolate has a history of its own. In 16th century Aztec culture, one cocoa bean could be traded for a tamale, and 100 beans could buy a good turkey hen. Today chocolate is more than an \$80 billion a year business. The economy of chocolate involves both growers and processors, as well as investors and marketers. The most renowned producers are found in Belgium, France, Switzerland, and several in the US.



# Types of Chocolate



**Bittersweet Chocolate (70% cacao or more)** has the most intense chocolate taste. It can also be described as bitter, roasted, fruity, earthy and nutty.



**Semisweet Chocolate (50-65% cacao)** has a balance of chocolate flavor and sugar, but is not too sweet. It can be described as nutty, spicy, floral, earthy and sometimes with hints of fruit and caramel.



**Milk Chocolate (30-45% cacao)** is milder and sweeter. It has fewer flavors, but can include brown sugar, milk, cream, cocoa, vanilla, honey, caramel and malt.



**White Chocolate (0% cacao)** has no cacao, but may be considered chocolate if it has 20% cocoa butter. It is very sweet and may also have cream, milk, honey, vanilla and caramel notes.



## How to Taste Chocolate

**When tasting chocolate, it is important to use all the senses.**

### **SIGHT:**

First, look at the chocolate. Is it dark, light, even white? Is it smooth and glossy, rough, flaky or powdery? If it has fruit or nuts it may be bumpy.

### **SOUND:**

Now break the piece of chocolate and listen to the sound. Do you hear a sharp “snap”?

### **SMELL:**

Next, smell the chocolate. Like wine, chocolate can have many different smells and flavors. Do you smell cream or butter, a fruity or nutty aroma, or even a smoky note? Some chocolates have a floral or oak component.

### **TOUCH:**

Now take a bite of the chocolate and let it sit on your tongue. Is it smooth, rough, soft, waxy? Does it melt right away? The feel or texture is important.

### **TASTE:**

Now the taste. Is it bitter? Does it taste sweet? Does it taste as you expected it would after smelling it? If you have a drink, take a sip and then another bite. Does the chocolate taste different when combined with another flavor (coffee, wine, soda)?

# Tasting

Choose a variety of chocolates with different amounts of cocoa. Here's a sample tasting:



## **Spain** — *Valor Dark Chocolate, 70%, with forest fruits*

Spain is well known its thick hot chocolate served with churros as the typical merienda or afternoon snack. Its common to sit at a chocolatería, perhaps just off the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, enjoy churros y chocolate and watch the city slow to a crawl for the afternoon. The Spanish don't worry about ruining their dinner with such a hearty snack, because they typically do not have the evening meal until 9:00pm or even later. This particular Spanish chocolate bar is flavored with berries.

## **France** — *Valrhona Noir Alpaco, 66%*

If Spanish chocolate reminds one of a drink, French chocolate might remind one of a pastry shop. Can't you just taste the pain au chocolat in your favorite patisserie? Or maybe chocolate mousse in a French bistro? What about the delightful simplicity of that little piece of chocolate sitting on your saucer when you stop for an afternoon coffee at any café. Oh, those French! Valrhona has been creating exceptional chocolate in the French style since 1922. They buy beans directly from plantations in South America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. This chocolate we are tasting is from a single source in Ecuador. It is described as floral and oaky.

## **Italy** — *Guido Castagna, Cremini*

Located in Turin, Guido Castagna is a globally renowned artisan chocolatier: They have won multiple prizes at the International Chocolate Awards over the years. Their production system is meticulous, from the selection of the best cocoa beans to their unique process of aging chocolate six months before production can begin. One of their most famous products is a cremini, which contains two layers of gianduja and a filling of hazelnut paste.

## **Costa Rica** — *Nahua 39% Milk Chocolate Bar*

One of the leading brands of Costa Rican chocolate, Nahua offers a range of both dark, milk, and infused chocolate bars using the high caliber cacao the nation is known for. In a milk chocolate bar, you will find a sweeter taste, with more bright notes of caramel and cream. Compare this to some of the chocolates you have tasted with a higher percentage of cacao: Do you enjoy the bitterness or prefer the lighter, sweeter flavor?

## **Mexico** — *Taza Mexican Chocolate*

The roots of the Aztec drinking chocolate tradition remain strong in modern Mexican chocolate. Cacao nibs are stone ground with sugar and cinnamon to create a warmly spiced, more granular textured chocolate than the hot cocoa of the USA. When simmered with warm milk, the chocolate melts into a creamy beverage that has all the cozy notes of fall blended in.

Remember to use all your senses as you look, listen, smell, feel, and taste this high quality chocolate. Compare the chocolates. What notes do you taste? Which ones have more cacao? What's your favorite?

## **SAMPLE DISCUSSIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

There are many ways to enhance this activity for your students depending on your subject.

### **History**

Discover more of the history behind chocolate and how it became such a beloved staple worldwide.

### **Foreign Languages**

Use as a vocabulary exercise and learn about cultural variations in the production regions.

### **Economics**

Unpack the global business model of chocolate production, including efforts to promote fair trade.

### **Sciences**

Explore the chemistry behind chocolate's makeup and how human taste buds process different sensations.