



INDULGENT STRAWBERRY DIPPED IN CHOCOLATE FONDUE/THINKSTOCK

Food — of the — GODS

Revered for thousands of years, science has elevated chocolate to the ranks of superfood – you just need to know what to look for

Writer Danielle Parla

Chocolate is arguably one of the favourite foods of all time, and it is therefore no surprise that the evergreen tree bearing the fruit pods chocolate is made from, called *Theobroma cacao*, means ‘food of the gods’. The Mayans and Aztecs were the first to cultivate the cacao plant found deep in tropical rainforests more than 2,000 years ago. Prized for its healthy properties, they would use cacao seeds to make a warm beverage called *xocolātl* (‘bitter water’) for warriors and royalty. Cacao was so valued it was used as currency, and in sacred ceremonies.

The Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez brought the bean back to Europe in the 16th century where the beverage was called ‘chocolate’ and sweetened with sugar to satisfy Spanish tastes. It wasn’t until the 1800s that technological advances allowed chocolate to be made into the solid form we know today.

Cacao beans come from a large ovoid

cacao pod that ripens from yellow to orange-red before being fermented, roasted and ground to form a liquid, paste or block. Within the cacao pod are both the brown cacao seed and rich, buttery white cacao butter – the fattiest part of the fruit, loaded with omega-6 and omega-9 fatty acids. Both are used in the creation of chocolate.

THE REAL DEAL

Cacao and cocoa sound similar and come from the same plant, however they have different tastes, nutritional benefits and costs. Cacao is the purest form of chocolate, which is raw and much less processed than cocoa powder. In the market today you can find cacao powder, nibs and paste, which are rich in nutrients and fibre since the whole cacao bean is intact and cold-pressed. Cacao powder is made from ground raw cacao beans keeping living enzymes intact; cacao nibs are made from chopped cacao beans and resemble

chocolate chips without the added fat and sugars; and cacao paste comes from slowly heating cacao nibs to preserve nutrients – a less-processed form of dark chocolate bar. All forms of cacao are popular with vegan and raw foodies as a nutrient-rich ingredient for smoothies and desserts.

Cocoa powder is raw cacao that has been roasted at high temperatures and made into the powder many of us are familiar with in baking and drinks. Unfortunately the roasting changes the molecular structure of the cacao bean, reducing the enzyme content and much of its nutritional value.

Many chocolate candy bars use cocoa powder with significant amounts of sugar and fat. If you want the health benefits found in chocolate, stick to dark chocolate since the creamy sweetness of milk chocolate comes from the addition of milk solids, cocoa butter and sugar. When milk solids are added to the cacao (milk chocolate), the powerhouse of nutrients and antioxidants



that cacao offers aren't able to be absorbed. And white chocolate technically isn't even chocolate because it is made from cacao butter, milk solids, sugar and flavourings and contains none of the health benefits of dark chocolate.

Now you can enjoy your favourite dark chocolate guilt-free knowing that raw, unprocessed cacao is truly a superfood loaded with organic compounds like polyphenols, flavanols, and catechins that are biologically active antioxidants. It is also a source of alkaloids such as caffeine, which acts as a stimulant and can improve mental alertness; and phenylethylamine which stimulates dopamine to enhance mood. Cacao both contains and stimulates serotonin production which also increases feelings of pleasure. Helping with energy levels, hair growth and skin repair, dark

chocolate contains significant amounts of iron, magnesium, copper, manganese, fibre, potassium, phosphorus, zinc and selenium, not to mention vitamins B1, B2, B3, B5, B8 and E.

BEAN SUPREME

Although the taste of the irresistible bean is quite bitter, every cacao bean has a unique flavour and character depending on the country of cultivation. Like wine, chocolate can be described as fruity, earthy, intense and with notes like vanilla, blackcurrant and black tea.

A chocolatier's kitchen is where unique ingredients are mixed with cacao to create novel taste sensations. The Mayan and Aztecs added chilli, honey, vanilla and a variety of spices, while the Spanish added sugar to make the bitter taste sweeter. "The

Swiss added dried milk as a way to deal with the surplus of milk during the 1800s," says Maren Gnädinger, owner of chocolate shop Xocolatl in Basel, Switzerland.

Chocolate lovers are wooed by the variety of flavours available in the market today. Leading Austrian chocolatier, Zotter, creates some of the most spectacular and ethical chocolate around. Your conscience will be as content as your tastebuds knowing that all 365 varieties are handcrafted using organic cacao and wrapped in environmentally friendly packaging. Working directly with cacao farming cooperatives worldwide ensures delectable certified organic fair trade cacao that guarantees fair prices for farmers and preserves both indigenous cultures and the environment.

More than 3 million tons of cocoa beans

are consumed every year and it is important to consider the importance of fair trade to the cacao industry. The sweetness of chocolate quickly sours after learning that some of the worst forms of child labour are used in cacao production. In 2013 and 2014, Tulane University researchers identified 1,303,009 children working on cocoa farms in West Africa, up from 109,000 children in 2002 according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). There is power in your purchase – choose to support fair wages and worker dignity by purchasing chocolate with the fair trade label.

Tantalising for the taste buds, but also nourishing to the body, cacao and cacao butter have long been celebrated for their powerful moisturising properties when applied to the skin. Several innovative companies have harnessed the goodness of cacao to provide beauty benefits without the calories.

POSITIVELY GUILT-FREE

The Chocolate Cleansing Balm from Holistic Green Beauty was inspired by the antioxidants raw cacao offers. The topical application of this delectable butter balm provides anti-ageing benefits by helping to neutralise free-radical damage, stimulate microcirculation whilst hydrating dry skin and infusing it with minerals. The company's founders created a handmade, organic, vegan chocolate cleansing balm that doesn't compromise the environment, or the luxurious sensory experience of the product.

Respectfully harvested in its native Amazonian environment, the Peruvian cacao bean is a core ingredient of Amala's Rejuvenate anti-ageing collection. Organic



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cocoa bean extract has been clinically proven to subdue inflammation, rebuild skin's natural moisture barrier, stimulate cell renewal and microcirculation, restore elasticity and provide antioxidant protection. The luxury skincare brand is committed to sourcing ingredients from

farm partners around the world, to whom it pays fair trade wages. The latest addition to Rejuvenate – the Advanced Firming Concentrate, demonstrates results attesting to their philosophy that you don't have to sacrifice results for a responsible product.

Faith Aromatherapy's Radiant Chocolate Peppermint scrub is seductive and luxurious in scent and texture, while providing the skin with nourishment and increased circulation.

Considered a powerful plant medicine, cacao has been used ceremonially for thousands of years as a gateway to transformation. There has been a re-emergence of cacao ceremonies around the world and UK-based Rebekah Shaman is devoted to bridging the messages of plant medicine from the Amazon to the generation living in the concrete jungle. She guides traditional shamanic cacao ceremonies in London in order to assist with "reconnecting to nature and our deep inner guidance, discovering more about ourselves, releasing negative blockages and finding peace and clarity."

Quality dark chocolate is truly a gift of nature – delicious and nutritious and offers anti-inflammatory, anti-ageing, cardiovascular and cognitive health benefits, mood and energy enhancement. Stick to organic and fair trade dark chocolate and learn to identify the percentage of cacao and other ingredients on the label. A minimum of 70 per cent cacao, minimal sugar and consume no more than 50g a day to avoid weight gain, is a good guideline. 🌿

CHOCOLATE CAKE WITH FRESH STRAWBERRY/THINKSTOCK; HOMEMADE CHOCOLATE/THINKSTOCK; MAKING CHOCOLATES IN A KITCHEN/THINKSTOCK

