

the TROPICAL GARDEN

WINTER 2014



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THE SURPRISINGLY COMPLEX HISTORY OF EVERYONE'S FAVORITE TREAT

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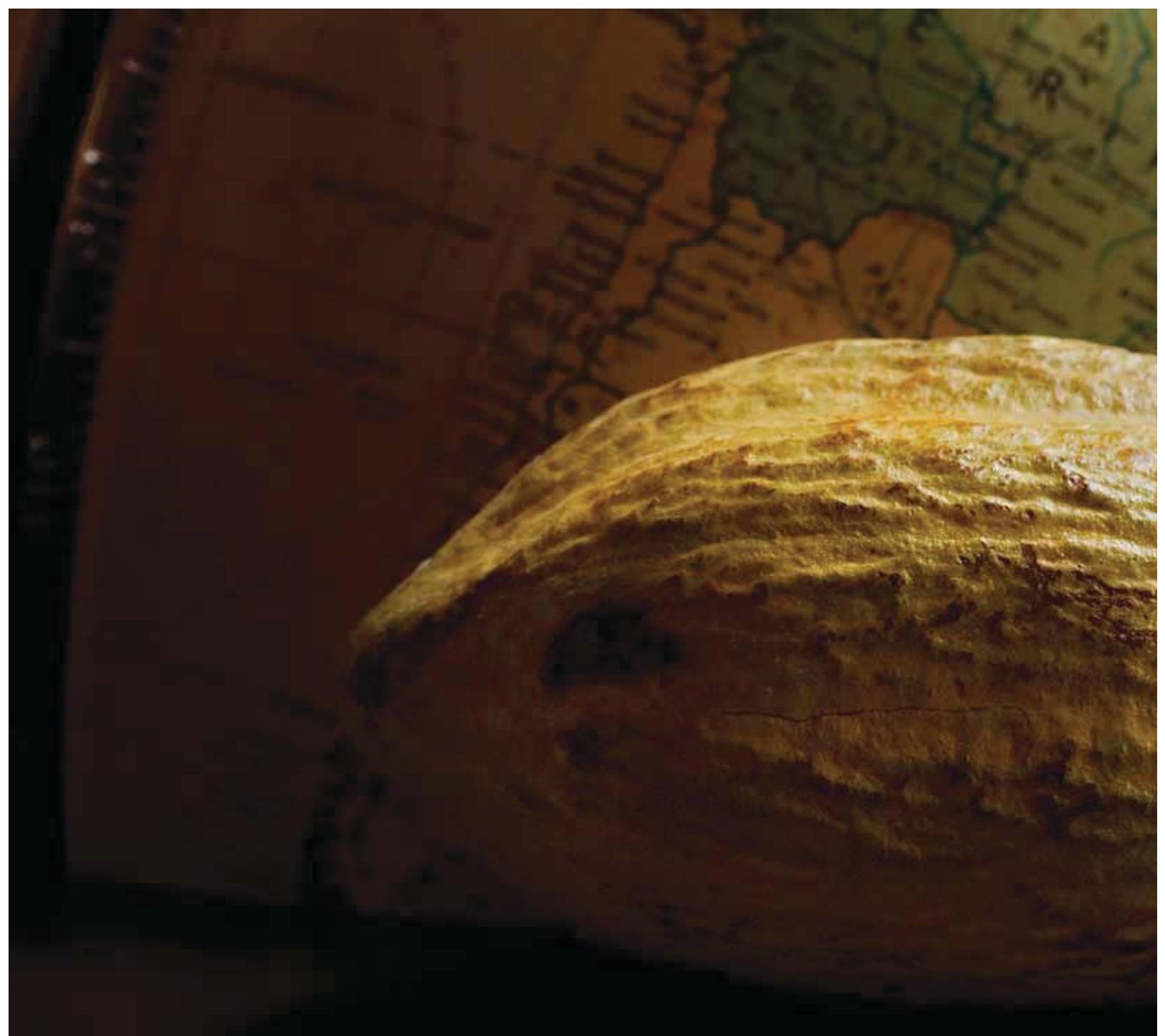
LIZARDS AT FAIRCHILD



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SAVING FLORIDA'S WILD NATIVE ORCHIDS





The Surprisingly Complex History
of Everyone's Favorite Treat:

CHOCOLATE

By Kenneth Setzer



In a word-association test, what would you say to the prompt “chocolate?” Maybe “Swiss?” Or “milk?” Probably not “the Amazon.”

But, indeed, chocolate’s ancestral homeland is in the Upper Amazon Basin of South America. *Theobroma cacao* is a fairly small tropical tree. Alone, it’s a bit unimpressive, until you consider how its seeds have changed the world. Sometime in the misty past—at least about 2,600 years ago—the Mayans discovered that if you ferment and roast the seeds of the *Theobroma cacao* tree and grind it into a powdery paste, it makes for an invigorating drink, especially when mixed with ground corn, honey, pepper and other spices to ameliorate some of the bitterness. It’s even possible the Olmecs discovered this mixture centuries before the Mayans. The Mayans even engaged in the practice of giving chocolate to your sweetheart: A Mayan codex in the British Museum shows cacao being exchanged during a Mayan wedding. This practice is continued by prospective bridegrooms in some contemporary Mayan cultures in the Guatemalan Highlands, as well as around the U.S. on Valentine’s Day.

This Amazon Basin native would have been an imported delicacy for the Mayans in their more northern homelands of Mesoamerica—composed of current-day Mexico and portions of northern Central America—and was probably being consumed locally in its native area long before the Mayans used it. In fact, it was not originally consumed as a treat, but rather had medicinal use, spiritual significance and monetary value, for both the Mayans and the Aztecs.

Christopher Columbus encountered cacao on his fourth and final expedition in 1502. His expedition brought back some cacao seeds to Spain, but they went unprocessed and unappreciated. It took another explorer, Hernando Cortez, to realize he might be onto something useful. He and his men reported that Montezuma, the Aztec emperor, imbibed a chocolate drink many times a day, supposedly from a solid gold vessel. Cortez successfully introduced cacao to Europe. The elite back in Spain took to the drink, but only after mixing it with sugarcane and spices like cinnamon and nutmeg. By 1640, the Spanish publication *A Curious Treatise on the Nature and Quality of Chocolate* claimed that in Spain and its colonies chocolate “is drunk all summer, once, or twice a day, or indeed at any time, by way of entertainment.”

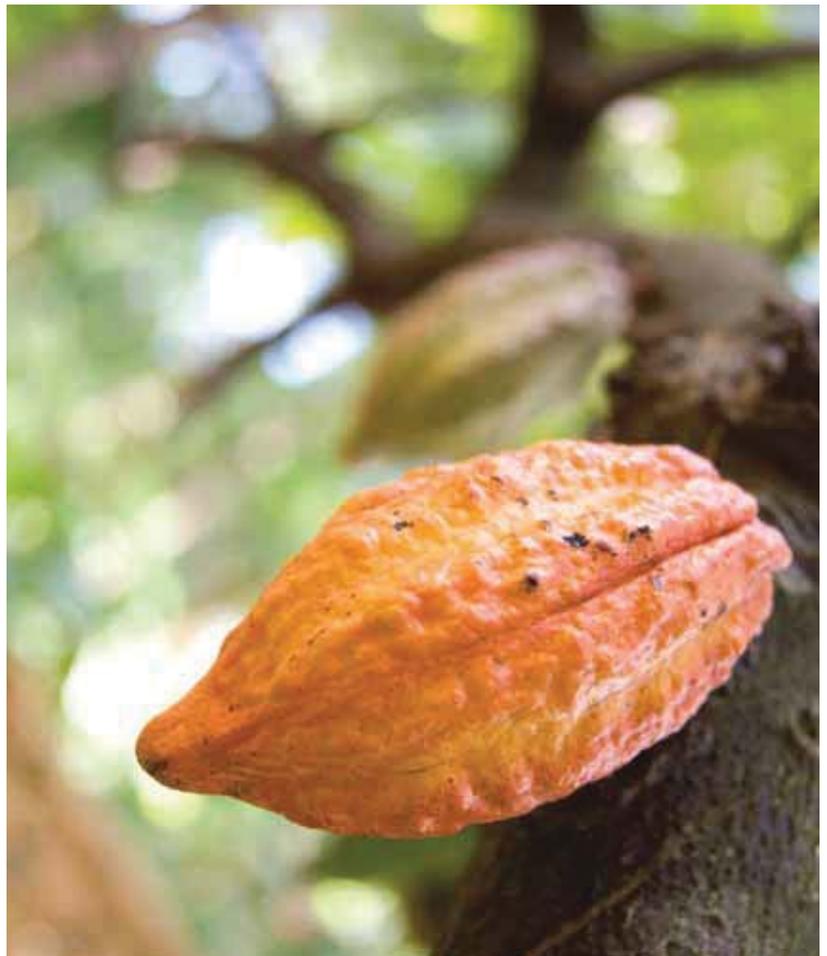
Europeans were getting hooked, and it spread throughout the continent. In 1655, the English took Jamaica from the Spanish, thus acquiring the chocolate-making ability of its people and sending the technology back to London. There, by 1722, it was considered by many to be a salubrious concoction, “recommended to be a Nourisher (sic) and Restorer of the Body.” But it took the Industrial Revolution to democratize chocolate consumption. A steam engine was devised that could grind cacao, eliminating the need for labor-intensive hand grinding. Coffee houses began offering the chocolate drink, and even chocolate houses proliferated. It was only in 1847, however, that Fry and Sons of England introduced chocolate for eating rather than drinking; the first chocolate bar was born. Chocolate in solid form was set to become a staple on polar expeditions, military campaigns and extended sailing voyages.



PREVIOUS PAGE
Photo by Ken Setzer/FTBG.

ABOVE
Where chocolate comes from—gathering cacao pods in Ecuador, circa 1907.
LC-USZ62-98874, American Stereoscopic Company.

RIGHT
Theobroma cacao is a cauliflorous tree, which means it produces fruit directly from its woody trunk and branches.



Like wine,
cacao flavor is
influenced by
its terroir—
its growing
conditions and
location.

Advertisement for McCobb's Owl
Brand Chocolate Creams,
circa 1886.
LC-USZ62-92565, Henry McCobb, Nov. 1886.



Chocolate use was no less intense in early America. The majority was manufactured in Boston, followed by Philadelphia; Benjamin Franklin himself offered it for sale in his print shop.

It was inevitable that entrepreneurial nations would attempt to grow cacao closer to home or in their colonies. The Portuguese monarchy ordered cacao seedlings shipped from Brazil to São Tomé and Príncipe off the African coast in the early 1820s, strategically before Brazil's independence in 1822. By the late 1800s, most cacao was grown on mainland Africa. Today, the Ivory Coast is the world's largest exporter of cacao.

The resurgence of interest in cacao's health benefits—as well as gustatory curiosity—has led chocolatiers back to *Theobroma cacao's* roots, in search of wild cacao. After so many centuries of cultivation, could wild cacao, what the Mayans reaped, still exist? *Outside* magazine writer Rowan Jacobsen wrote about accompanying a chocolate enthusiast into the Bolivian Amazon to find wild cacao. It was found and eventually turned into high-end gourmet chocolate. The USDA's Agricultural Research Service reported in 2011 its discovery in Peru of three populations of cacao previously unknown to science. Like wine, cacao flavor is influenced by its terroir—its growing conditions and location. Most of the cacao produced in the Ivory Coast derives from only one or two populations of trees exported nearly two centuries ago, so chances are, the chocolate you eat isn't going to vary much. This is good for companies aiming for consistency, but not very interesting if you want to taste all the variety the cacao tree has to offer.

When you next treat yourself to chocolate, remember the route cacao has taken through history and get ready to try some of the “new” old varieties the industry may bring us. 