



Hot Chocolate at 16 New Street

THE HISTORY OF HOT CHOCOLATE

Chocolate has been used and revered since ancient times, originally by the inhabitants of Latin America, where the cacao tree grew wild. In around 450BC, the Aztecs believed cacao seeds were a gift from the god of wisdom and used them as a form of currency. They were also used to produce a bitter ceremonial drink - very different from the chocolate of today.

In 1519 Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his crew were fascinated to observe the great Aztec ruler Moctezuma consuming cacao in huge quantities and in 1528 the first cocoa beans were exported to Spain. Praised by Cortés as a 'divine drink that builds up resistance and fights fatigue... and permits man to walk for a whole day without food', chocolate soon spread in popularity. Initially chocolate was enjoyed as a drink, sweetened with sugar and adapted to European tastes with the addition of cinnamon or black pepper instead of chilli. As it was a luxury item, and therefore heavily taxed, it was too expensive for most people to enjoy and only the wealthy were able to indulge regularly.

In 1657 the first chocolate house was established in London by a Frenchman who marketed his product as 'an excellent West India drink [that] cures and preserves the body of many diseases.' He not only sold chocolate ready to drink but also gave lessons on how to make this fashionable new beverage at home.

CHOCOLATE PROCESSING

Before the drink could be enjoyed, the cacao beans - or cocoa-nuts as they were called - needed a great deal of preparation. First the beans had to be opened, then the pulp and beans were placed in heaps to ferment, and finally the beans were separated from the pulp and left to dry in the sun. All of this work was done prior to shipping. When the dried beans arrived in Europe, they were roasted (much like coffee), the shells removed and the nibs ground by hand on a stone called a 'metate' to form a thick and gritty paste before being shaped into lozenges or cakes. Initially this work was done by the cook or kitchen maid, but as chocolate grew in popularity enterprising merchants realised they could import and process the beans into cakes or 'pastilles' for a good profit.

In their raw state, the chocolate slabs were too bitter to enjoy as confectionary, so instead they were turned into a drink by melting the grated chocolate in milk, or sometimes wine or sherry mixed with water. As chocolate spread in popularity, different flavourings were added - including ambergris, cinnamon, vanilla, cardamom and chilli - as well as thickeners such as cornflour or sometimes eggs and cream.

In time special tools were invented to assist with the preparation, including chocolate pots and graters - and long sticks called 'molinetes', which were used to whip the chocolate and make it frothy.

Being such a rich drink, hot chocolate was traditionally served in small cups. Gentlemen would drink hot chocolate laced with brandy at fashionable clubs, and ladies would often take a cup of thickened and spiced chocolate early in the morning, which would fortify them until breakfast.



Hot Spiced Chocolate in the Georgian style:

INGREDIENTS:

- 500ml full cream milk
- 1 cinnamon stick or vanilla pod
- pinch of chilli flakes (optional), to taste
- 50g bitter chocolate (minimum 70% cocoa solids)
- 1-2 teaspoons sugar, to taste
- splash of single cream (optional)

METHOD:

1. Pour the milk into a pan and add the cinnamon stick or vanilla pod and chilli (if using). Set the pan over a very low heat and infuse for at least 10 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, grate the chocolate into a heavy-based pan.
3. Strain the hot, infused milk over the chocolate and whisk to combine.
4. Add the sugar, a little at a time, tasting between each addition. Add the cream (if using) and whisk well to form a frothy foam.
5. Pour into small cups and enjoy

VARIATIONS:

With Cardamom

Crush 2 cardamom pods in a pestle and mortar. Roast in a dry pan to release their fragrance and infuse with the milk - omitting the cinnamon, vanilla and chilli.

With Nutmeg

Replace the cinnamon, vanilla and chilli with a grating of nutmeg.

With Orange

Use a vegetable peeler to shave off a piece of orange peel and add to the pan with the milk - omitting the cinnamon, vanilla and chilli.