

Corn & Chocolate in Latin America

K-12 Resource Guide

In many parts of Latin America, holidays, including Christmas and New Years, include corn and chocolate based food, which have sacred origins. This guide provides a few resources for educators to develop lessons and activities for their students.

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History of Corn in Latin America

Corn

Recipes

Pozole



Tamales



History of Corn in Latin America

Popol Vuh: The Creation Story of the Maya

- Short Version from Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian
- Long Version from UT Austin

Hunahpu & Xbalanque: The Hero Twins M

- Worksheet
- Story and Activity



History of Corn in Latin America

The Beginning: Aztecs

Quetzalcóatl, one of the creator gods, is often depicted as a bird or plumed god, went to see the Lord of Death for precious bones. After many tests, Quetzalcoatl got the bones but in a chase dropped them and they broke. He took the broken remains to god-paradise, Tamoanchan, where other gods ground them up. Then he sprinkled them with his blood thus made the first 2 humans. But they were very weak. The gods realized the humans needed something to eat. A red ant brought some corn from the Mountain of Our Sustenance, Tonacatepetl. Quetzalcoatl became a black ant, went to the mountain and brought back corn. The gods chewed the corn into a paste and placed it on the lips of the humans who stirred and became stronger.

Quetzalcoatl wanted the mountain and tried to tie it up and drag it to paradise, Tamoanchan, but the mountain wouldn't budge. A group of gods split the mountain open with a stick and the kernels were swept away by the gods of rain, The Tlaloques. The corn kernels adopted their colors, blue, white, yellow and red.

Legend of
Quetzalcoatl



History of Corn in Latin America



Because of this divine connection, corn is the foundation of spirituality as well as the source of and sustainer of life in Mesoamerica which includes the southwestern US down to Peru. Corn was grown only for personal consumption not profit. Selling the gift from the gods would have been sacrilegious. That changed when the Europeans arrived.

Originally, women harvested and grew the corn which they ground to flour, boil, mash to make different food items. As indigenous people migrated north to the eastern woodlands into present day US and North America, they took corn with them.

Even though the native indigenous people shared corn with the Pilgrims from England which saved them from starvation, the Europeans saw corn as a commodity to be sold, not as a gift to be honored.



Teosinte, or wild corn, has its own interesting history and evolution leaving it unable to grow in the wild. What we know today as domestic corn is estimated to have been developed about 7,000 years ago. Today's classifications include:

- dent corn
- flint corn
- flour corn
- popcorn
- sweet corn
- waxy corn
- pod corn

[More information](#)
about Teosinte
from Native
Seeds Search



While corn is staple crop for over a majority of the world's countries, US policies created a global surplus of corn and some argue this has harmed the Mexican economy and small farmers. For example, the price of imported corn from the US is cheaper than domestically-produced corn.

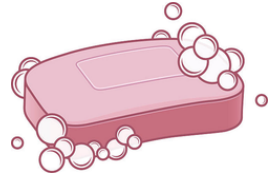
During the 19th century, the development of the midwest was closely tied to corn. The uses for corn expanded beyond human consumption. In the 1960's only about 12% was used for human food and industrial products. Corn was fed to livestock and exported.



Facts About Corn

Currently, there are over 500 different uses of corn including:

- High-fructose corn syrup
- Ethanol
- Plastics
- Packaging materials
- Insulating materials
- Adhesives
- Chemicals
- Explosives
- Paint
- Paste
- Abrasives
- Dyes
- Insecticides
- Pharmaceuticals
- Organic acids
- Solvents
- Rayon
- Soaps



Additional Resources

- [UNM Researches and Maize in Mesoamerica](#)
- [The Discovery of Corn](#)
- [Amaizing!](#)
- [Maize: An Everlasting Spiritual, Communal and Communal Sustenance](#)
- [Food of the Americas: The Origin of Corn and its Role in Folklore of the New World](#)
- [Evolution of Maize](#)
- [Corn production University of Illinois](#)
- [Corn production USDA 2024](#)



Corn & Chocolate in Latin America

K-12 Resource Guide

Chocolate

Recipes

Mole



Mexican
Hot Chocolate



History of Chocolate in Latin America

Chocolate dates back to the Olmec civilization which predates Aztec and Mayan civilizations. Cacao is not as easy to grow as corn and cannot grow in every region of the continent. The Olmecs lived in what is now southern Mexico and were the first to ferment, roast, and grind cacao beans for consumption – drink or gruel – possibly as early as 1000-1500 BCE.

While no written history of Olmecs exists, their pots and vessels show traces of the chemical theobromine found in cacao.

Theobroma cacao is the scientific name of the plant. The word chocolate is derived from its earlier names “xocolatl” “chikolatl” and “cacahuatl.”



History of Chocolate in Latin America

It is not known how the decision to harvest, dry, ferment and roast the cacao seeds was made. Cacao is naturally bitter in flavor. One idea is that someone spit the seeds into a fire after eating the fruit and smelled the delicious aroma.

Cacao and cocoa beans are the same thing. Dishes are still made with unfermented beans. Fermenting adds body and richness. Traditional fermentation involves removing the seeds from pods and fermenting them in a leaf-covered pile. Once fermented, they can be roasted over fire.

Today there are roasting and conching techniques to reduce the bitter flavor. Roasted beans are cracked into nibs and then ground into a paste. To make what we know today as chocolate, cocoa butter and sugar are added. For appearance and texture, the mixture is then heated and conched, or continuously stirred, for 6-78 hours, and finally tempered or cooled.

Molinillo whisk for
stirring chocolate



History of Chocolate in Latin America

The Olmec civilization declined for unknown reasons but Mayans and Aztecs were influenced greatly by the ancient Olmecs. The Mayan civilization from 250-1600 CE used the drink for mainly religious rituals. They used a metate and mano to grind the beans. Once there was a paste, hot water was added to make the hot chocolate. Mayans then started adding flavoring, such as chili, vanilla, and magnolia. The Mayans also started frothing the beverage by using a molinillo, and added color from cochineal which is an insect from which dye is derived. The Maya also used the beans as currency.

In the Popol Vuh video, the cacao tree was mentioned in the part about the skull/decapitated head spit on the mother's hand of the Heroic Twins. In another version, the cacao tree is not mentioned directly. There is a reference to a fruit tree with skulls of the father of the Twins. Cacao is a fruit and the beans are the seeds.

The Aztecs continued the Mayan ways of making hot chocolate and also expanded flavoring to include cinnamon. For the Aztecs, cacao drinks were for those of high status – nobles, warriors, and priests – and special occasions such as initiations and the end of the calendar year. Around the 12th century cacao played a role in the seal of marriage and could be part of a woman's dowry. Women may have been judged as to how well they made cacao and froth. Additionally, it could be used for tribute payments and currency.



History of Chocolate in Latin America

Cacao was believed to have magical and spiritual properties. Today we know that cacao has antioxidants which protect body cells from damage.

Christopher Columbus encountered chocolate on his fourth voyage from Spain and while he reported it to the Spanish king, Columbus didn't know what to do with the beans.

In the 1520s, Hernan Cortez brought back to Spain chocolate and some of the equipment to brew the drink after his invasion of the region. In 1544, a Dominican friar introduced hot chocolate to Prince Philip.

The Europeans did not care for the bitter flavor and handled that the same way they did coffee, which came from the Turks. Adding milk, cream or sweeteners, such as honey and sugar cane, reduced the bitter flavor. Sugar cane originally came from the South Pacific. It was also a crop of the new world.



Metate and Mano
or mortar and
pestle



History of Chocolate in Latin America

Concurrent to the Europeans learning about chocolate was the Spanish Inquisition and expulsion of Jewish people from Spain. First, many went to Portugal which is likely where they learned about the drink and how to make it. When they were expelled from Portugal, many sought refuge in Dutch and English colonies in the Caribbean as well as Central and South America. Their knowledge of the drink allowed them to work as producers and middlemen in the chocolate trade.

With the Aztecs slaughtered and the adaptations to make the drink less bitter, the Europeans controlled the market and brought their version of chocolate back to the colonies in all of the Americas. Today's brands Abuelita and Ibarra offer Mexican hot chocolate tablets that most reflect a blend of traditional Aztec chocolate and European influence.

Additional Resources

- [History of Chocolate](#)
- [Smithsonian What We Know About the Earliest History of Chocolate](#)
- [Harvard A Culture of Cacao and Chocolate](#)
- [Cacao in Olmec Society](#)
- [Chocolate in Mesoamerica](#)
- [Yale The Mesoamerican Origins of Chocolate](#)
- [The History of Jews and Chocolate](#)
- [The Making of Modern Chocolate](#)

