

# Cocoa

## The Food of the Gods

The cacao tree is native to the Americas, and yet another amazing crop from the new world. There is some dispute as to where exactly within the Americas it originated, but it is commonly believed that it may have originated in the foothills of the Andes in the Amazon basin. It was a common currency throughout central and South America before the Spanish arrived, and at several points in history was a restricted beverage reserved for the Mayan elite. This reached its pinnacle with King Montezuma II, an important emperor of the Aztecs civilisation, whom it is said, that when he dined he took no other beverage than chocolate and that it was served in a golden goblet and eaten with a golden spoon! Flavored with vanilla and spices, he managed to consume up to 50 portions each day, making him history's first recorded chocoholic!

The peoples of central and south America drank their cocoa in a similar fashion to the way we consume coffee; as a hot bitter drink that was renowned for its tonic and stimulating effects. In fact, It was The Aztecs who called it "xocolatl" meaning warm or bitter liquid, from where we derive our modern name chocolate. One of the more ancient names for cocoa was 'yollotl- eztli', meaning "heart's-blood," - a phrase which referred to its ability to give strength and endurance. From a western perspective, cocoa can be said to be the heart's "blood" due to its unique chemical constituents that affect the heart both physically and emotionally. Theobromine is one such constituent, and not only a component of cocoa, but also its botanic name, which literally means 'Gods' Food'.

Perhaps the best home use for this food of the gods is as a gentle yet powerful mood enhancer to combat the many stresses of modern life. Modern research has identified an amazing compound found in chocolate that is responsible for its well known feel-good factor and have called it anandamide, after the yogic term 'ananda' for bliss. Some interesting recent research points to anandamide being in a close relationship with the stress hormone cortisol, produced by our adrenal glands when under pressure; it seems anandamide naturally reduces cortisol and its resulting stress and inflammation. Furthermore, Anandamide may turn out to be the common link between all mental illness... anxiety, depression, bipolar, and schizophrenia. Schizophrenics apparently have greatly elevated anandamide levels which they initially thought was implicated in causing the disorder, but now realise that the opposite is in fact the case as it is produced naturally by the body as an anti-psychosis mechanism! Finally, the blissful feelings that are induced after exercise also seem to be a result of anandamide rather than the previously thought endorphins. It literally is the blissful chemical!

It doesn't stop there however, for Cocoa is also a potent source of serotonin, dopamine, and phenyl ethylamine. These are three well-studied neurotransmitters which help alleviate depression and are associated with the elevated feelings of well-being so familiar to chocolate lovers and premenstrual women. In addition to that, Cocoa contains the powerful amino acid Tryptophan, (no longer for sale in Australia), which

actually makes the neurotransmitter serotonin itself. Cocoa also contains the rather difficult to pronounce MAO Inhibitors, which help stave off anxiety and depression because they allow serotonin and dopamine to remain in the bloodstream longer without being broken down. Altogether this makes cocoa one of the most powerful mood enhancers and antidepressants known to herbal medicine, and best of all, it tastes fantastic!

### **But What About All That Caffeine?**

There is some popular confusion about the stimulating effects of chocolate and its caffeine content, so it is time to lay those fears to rest. The average cup of hot cocoa contains only about 10 mg of caffeine (coffee contains up to 150mg) but over 200 mg of theobromine. Caffeine's ability to induce nervousness, tension and interrupted sleep is well known, Theobromine however is classified as a mild central nervous system stimulant that is also relaxing to smooth muscles, and dilates the blood vessels. It has stimulating effects that are similar to those of caffeine and yet only a quarter as strong. It is also important to note that the caffeine in the cacao fruit is found mainly in the shell or membrane which encloses the cacao beans. When the membrane is removed however, the chocolate made will be of higher quality and essentially free of caffeine. Interestingly, as the traditional name 'hearts-blood' implies, Theobromine is also a cardiac stimulant and has been used to treat high blood pressure.

Finally, in addition to keeping the gods (and goddesses) in a constant state of bliss, cocoa may also contribute to an eternity of ageless beauty and good health. Sound too good to be true? It's not; cocoa is perhaps the highest source of anti-oxidants so far identified by western science. Cornell University food scientists discovered that cocoa powder has nearly twice the antioxidants of red wine, and up to three times the antioxidants found in green tea! But what exactly is all the fuss about with antioxidants? It appears that the cause of most degenerative diseases, premature aging, and the creation of cancer cells is due to free radicals that float around oxidising the cells of our body. By preventing the damage to our DNA and mitochondria, antioxidants can stop and even reverse the aging process, and help prevent a wide range of degenerative diseases including cancer. Perhaps the best test of usable active anti-oxidant properties is the ORAC rating. You may be surprised to see the following top ten common antioxidant foods according to the ORAC test, and just how far in front Cacao really is:

1. Unprocessed Raw Cacao - ORAC 28,000
2. Acai Berries - ORAC 18,500
3. Dark Chocolate - ORAC 13,120
4. Goji berry Juice - 3,472
5. Pomegranates - 3,307
6. Blueberries - 2,400
7. Blackberries - 2,036
8. Garlic - 1,939
9. Cranberries - 1,750
10. Tahitian Noni Juice - 1,506

As a final point, I would like to address those old jaded cynics out there who would say 'who wants to live forever anyway?' Well, as one researcher on cacao pointed out, whilst the antioxidants are keeping you physically younger, the brain chemicals called 'MAO inhibitors' (previously referred to), actually make you feel like a young pup again! As it turns out, an interesting phenomenon that differentiates children from adults is the level of neurotransmitters found in the blood. As humans and animals age the level of neurotransmitters reduces, and with it that puppy-like enthusiasm for simply being alive. Cocoa, thanks to the MAO inhibitors, elevates the level of neurotransmitters kept in circulation and can therefore contribute to a long life of joy, wonder and giggle fits. No wonder it is known as the food of the gods! Of course, it is common knowledge that the Gods and Goddesses always buy organic, so to ensure the above referred to life of happiness and health, don't accept anything less.

- The Barefoot Doctor