The History of Chocolate: From Footnote to Center Stage

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According to the “Anonymous Conqueror,” author of the Narrative of Some Things of New Spain and the Great City of Temestitan Mexico, chocolate was “the most healthful and most nutritious aliment of all known to the world, for one who takes a cup of it, though he may make a long journey, can pass all day without taking another thing.”1 Published in 1556, the account consists of twenty-four chapters describing in detail the life and culture of the Mexica at the time of the Spanish conquest. In the narrative, the author devotes two whole chapters to cacao production and chocolate consumption, clearly underscoring their preeminent role in pre-Columbian America.2 This was not the first nor the last mention of chocolate left by Spanish conquistadors.3 Nevertheless, eclipsed by other crops such as sugar and tobacco, cacao lost its appeal and vanished from colonial narratives over time. In similar fashion, historians lost sight of the plant and the beverage. In World and Latin American History textbooks, cacao production and chocolate consumption appear as anecdotes that serve to illustrate the encounter between Emperor Moteuczoma and Hernán Cortés or as a footnote in the list of the many new crops that arrived in Europe in the sixteenth century.
During the past decade, interest in chocolate and its history has increased significantly. A quick Internet search will render thousands of hits. From the amateur chef blogger to the conscious environmentalist, people have become more interested in the history of chocolate consumption and cacao production. Following on this trend, a vast number of books dealing with chocolate have appeared in different publishing venues, both academic and non-academic. Similarly, some instructors have included units that study the commodity or, in some rare instances, have devoted a whole course to study cacao and chocolate. I belong to the second group. As a historian, I have always been interested in crops. My first love was sugar. For several years, I taught a graduate seminar that focused on sugar and explored the diversity that characterized sugar production in different Latin American regions. Moving into cacao and chocolate felt like a natural progression. Therefore, in 2016, I designed a course on the history of chocolate that I have taught to both history and non-history majors with much success.

My “History of Chocolate” course places cacao and chocolate front and center. Throughout the semester, students examine specific historical developments such as its Mesoamerican origins, colonial production and consumption, technological innovations, globalization of cacao production, and the modern chocolate industry, just to name a few. However, rather than studying cacao and chocolate in a vacuum, I use them as windows to understand larger historical processes such as ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, the Columbian exchange, the Trans-Atlantic system, the Industrial Revolution, European imperialism, and the expansion of global capitalism.

In this article, I wish to introduce my course to the readers of The History Teacher, hoping that they might find some of its content suitable for their own history classes. The first part of the paper presents six thematic units, in chronological progression, that serve as the backbone of the course. This section provides a summary of the content and main questions examined in each unit, as well as examples of the class activities and primary sources used to support the discussions. I have also included footnotes with the assigned readings and the most relevant literature I have used to write the lectures. The second section addresses some of the challenges I encountered in the selection of readings and provides additional details.
on the assignments, including notes about some adjustments I had to make due to COVID-19 restrictions. In the last section, I present a course spin-off in the form of a seminar that resulted in fascinating research papers produced by seniors in the History Department.

“History of Chocolate” Course Units

Unit 1: Mesoamerican Origins of Cacao and Chocolate

In the first unit, I present background information on Mesoamerican civilizations and the scientific breakthroughs that led to the discovery of cacao residues in archeological artifacts. Linguistic evidence links the Olmec to cacao, but it was the Maya who should be credited with the first-known chocolate recipe and for bringing it into a high art. Among the Maya, cacao and chocolate had divine meanings and played a significant role in the transition into the afterlife. Besides important spiritual connotations, consumption of cacao carried social significance for the living. Chocolate was consumed as a drink by the elite and shared with people of all classes during certain celebrations, feasts, and important rites of passage. The Mexica inherited the habit of chocolate drinking from their Mesoamerican ancestors. For them, the drink was central to displays of political power and its consumption was an essential mechanism used to reinforce social prestige and political influence. In Tenochtitlan, cacao beans were extremely valuable as tribute and currency. Long-distance merchants exchanged cotton, feathers, and cochineal for cacao, and sellers in the market in Tlatelolco relied on cacao beans as a currency. In Mesoamerica, cacao served both ritual and practical purposes. The crop was cherished as a symbol of great wealth and the beverage as a powerful substance that was associated with the divine and carried profound spiritual connotations.

Some of the questions guiding the lecture/discussion of this unit are: What was the role of cacao among Mesoamerican peoples? What were the social practices associated with chocolate consumption in Mesoamerica? What can we learn about societies when focusing on consumption patterns and symbolic meanings?

To start the discussion, I bring raw cacao beans for the class to sample. In most cases, students had never seen nor tasted cacao beans before. Therefore, the action of touching, peeling, and tasting...
Figure 1: Tribute list extracted by the Aztecs from Soconusco, from the Codex Mendoza, 1542. The image shows cacao beans and chocolate jars placed by jaguar skins. Bodleian Library MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1, fol. 47r. © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2fea788e-2aa2-4f08-b6d9-648c00486220/>. Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC 4.0.
the hard beans makes them more mindful of the complex processes involved in the transformation of cacao into chocolate and the degree of culinary sophistication and ingenuity required for Mesoamericans to “invent” chocolate.

During class discussion, we focus on the assigned readings that address the importance of cacao and chocolate in pre-Hispanic America in both symbolic and concrete ways. In addition to the readings, I present carefully selected images of archeological artifacts such as Maya ceramics and stelae that depict instances of cacao use and chocolate consumption. The readings and source analysis help students recognize the connections of cacao with the cycles of life and death, the divine, and royalty and power. Besides Maya artifacts, students examine images from the Florentine Codex and the Codex Mendoza that reveal chocolate’s practical uses as medicine, currency, and tribute (Figure 1). Finally, I ask students to read excerpts left by Spanish conquistadors such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo and the Anonymous Conqueror, as they provide additional insights into Mesoamerican cultural practices and consumption patterns—although mediated by the Spanish point of view. This discussion, which centers on the social and cultural practices associated with chocolate consumption and cacao use and production, gives students an opportunity to recognize the richness and complexity that characterized pre-Columbian civilizations. The crop and the beverage open a door for understanding Mesoamerican beliefs, social interactions, trading systems, and political developments. The discussion helps students understand important social developments and practices by focusing on consumption patterns and the social practices associated with them.

Unit 2: The Conquest and the “Discovery” of Chocolate

In this unit, I offer a chronology of the arrival of cacao and chocolate in Europe. Contrary to many narratives that place the first European encounter with chocolate when Hernán Cortés met Moteuczoma, Ferdinand Columbus should be credited with the earliest mention of the crop, although he mistook the strange beans for almonds. Four decades later, cacao finally made it to Europe. In 1544, a delegation of Kekchi Maya arrived to Spain bearing gifts, chocolate among them, and the Spanish Crown tasted the beverage
for the first time. The first official cacao shipment reached Europe in the 1580s. Initial responses to chocolate in Europe were mixed. The Spanish Crown took on the habit of drinking chocolate very soon, as did the conquistadors in the Americas. However, not everybody responded to the beverage in the same positive way. During these early years, many in Europe rejected the drink because of its taste, but mostly because of its association with indigenous peoples. It took several more decades for chocolate to become an acceptable beverage among Europeans.⁹

Some of the questions framing the lecture/discussion of this unit are: What were Europeans’ initial responses to chocolate and cacao? How did perceptions about chocolate and cacao illustrate ideas about the Americas? What processes take place when two different cultures collide?

To introduce the discussion of the European “discovery” of chocolate, students sample Mexican chocolate (spicy and with no sugar) and European chocolate (sweet and mild). This tasting illuminates how Europeans not only colonized the Americas, but also appropriated its food and changed it to make it more acceptable to the European palate. After tasting both samples, students realize that colonization did not only involve the appropriation of territories and resources, but also the modification of foodways and tastes.

After the tasting, we move into the discussion of the assigned readings, which focus on the place of chocolate and cacao during the early colonization period in both Europe and the Americas.¹⁰ In addition to the readings, I present textual sources that include excerpts selected from European authors such as Girolamo Benzoni and José de Acosta. The analysis encourages students to think about Europeans’ initial responses to chocolate and cacao and, most importantly, about the assumptions implicit in those responses and their role in reinforcing colonial power structures. By focusing on early responses to the beverage through the narratives left by conquistadors and missionaries, the discussion revolves around larger issues, such as the anxieties experienced by colonizers about the adoption of foods and habits that belonged to the colonized. Students become aware of the discourses developed by Spanish conquistadors to justify these new habits while at the same time maintaining their claim of superiority over the conquered groups—all important developments of the colonization process.
Unit 3: Colonial Consumption: European Adoption of Chocolate

In this unit, I give students information about the expansion of chocolate consumption throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After chocolate reached Spain, it spread throughout Europe and was adopted by royals as a symbol of status and sophistication. Europeans modified the recipe to suit their tastes with the incorporation of additives such as milk, almonds, and Old World spices like cinnamon and jasmine. Chocolate became an important social marker and the spectacles that accompanied its consumption, as well as the utensils used, served to distinguish the elites from the rest of society. Defining the status of chocolate and its place in European society occupied much of the seventeenth century. Questions surrounding the nature of chocolate arose and promoted important debates in European intellectual and ecclesiastical circles. To make it acceptable to European consumers, medical treatises reconciled the curative qualities of cacao and chocolate with the medicinal paradigm of the period, the humoral theory of disease (Figure 2). Chocolate became a divisive topic for the Catholic Church as well. Members of the clergy questioned the nature of the drink and, during many decades, different religious orders stood behind or against its consumption. After more than a century, debates were settled and chocolate finally conquered Europe.\textsuperscript{11}

Some of the questions informing the lecture/discussion of this unit are: What happened to chocolate when it became popular throughout Europe? How did Europeans justify and rationalize the consumption of chocolate? What happens to food and foodways when they become adopted by other cultures?

The discussion starts with an exercise that has gone through several iterations. In one version, I present a chart based on seventeenth-century medicinal practices that includes ailments and the different types of chocolates used to cure them. The class is divided into groups, with each one assigned a case patient with a series of symptoms. Based on the information, the group needs to decide what is the most appropriate chocolate for each health condition. Once they have been able to identify the cure, students need to explain to the class their diagnosis and suggested treatment. In another version, I present to the class a page of the Bills of Mortality published in London in 1665 (Figure 3). The document lists the weekly deaths
Figure 2: Title page from *The Indian Nectar, or A Discourse Concerning Chocolata* (1662) by Henry Stubbe. The English physician and scholar wrote the first original book in English on the subject of chocolate and its uses. Public domain image available via the Wellcome Collection, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/wcy7zarz>. Image 19 of 230.
Figure 3: “The Diseases and Casualties this Week” for September 12-19, 1665 from London’s Bills of Mortality. London authorities hired “searchers of the dead” to examine corpses and record causes of death. The logs were published weekly to let citizens know where diseases had spread. Public domain image available via the National Library of Medicine, <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmid-2378023R-bk>. Image 92 of 128.
Figure 4: La Cioccolata del Mattino (The Morning Chocolate), by Pietro Longhi, ca. 1775-1780. The Venetian painter chronicled daily activities in late eighteenth-century Europe. Digital image uploaded to Wikimedia Commons by a bot operated by user “Eloquence” on May 19, 2005, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pietro_Longhi_La_cioccolata_del_mattino_The_Morning_Chocolate_1775-1780.jpg>. 


in the city, detailing number and causes. After providing a brief background to the document and some demographic data from the period, I ask students to pay attention to the figures and the ailments that were affecting Londoners in those days. Both exercises are used to generate a discussion about the overall health of the population and the desperate need for medicine in disease-ridden seventeenth-century Europe, which in turn helps students understand why chocolate was initially accepted as a cure-all food. In each version, the exercise is followed by the analysis of excerpts from treatises on the medicinal role of cacao and chocolate such as The Natural History of Chocolate (1724) by D. de Quelus and The Indian Nectar: A Discourse Concerning Chocolata (1662) by Henry Stubbe.

The assigned readings complement the class discussion, as they revolve around the processes that took place for chocolate to become accepted in Europe. Still working in groups, students examine European chocolate recipes, including both the ingredients and utensils used. Both the group exercises as well as the assigned readings help them recognize how chocolate was changed and refashioned to suit both the palate and the world vision of European consumers. In addition to textual sources, for the last part of the discussion, students examine images depicting scenes of chocolate consumption in Europe (Figure 4). The images allow them to think about the meanings associated with chocolate in Europe and recognize similarities and differences with Mesoamerica. In the discussion, I encourage students to identify the origin of some modern associations of chocolate consumption such as female indulgence, sexuality, and luxury. By focusing on the dissemination of chocolate across Europe, students uncover the larger processes that took place while Europeans grappled with the Americas’ material cultures. In turn, this helps them understand important aspects of the relationships between colonized and colonizer and the place that the Americas occupied in the European worldview.

Unit 4: Colonial Production: Cacao in the Americas

In this unit, I shift the focus to Latin America by addressing the way Spanish colonial institutions functioned, with emphasis on labor arrangements and colonial trade. Follow the Equator and you will find cacao. Once Europeans developed a taste for chocolate, cacao
production in the Americas grew—and, with it, the demands for labor. During the early seventeenth century, Europeans established plantations in continental Latin America and the Caribbean with different levels of success. In Brazil, rather than cultivating the crop, the Jesuits relied on natives who collected wild cacao pods in the Amazon region. Although Brazil became an important cacao producer, it never rivaled the two most important producing regions of Latin America: the cacao centers of Tabasco and Soconusco in New Spain and the province of Caracas in Venezuela. By the mid-seventeenth century, Venezuela had overtaken Mexico to become the world’s leading producer of cacao. Initially, cacao production relied on native labor. However, after a few decades, enslaved Africans became the backbone of the cacao economy, in particular in Brazil and Venezuela, connecting cacao with the larger network of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Portuguese slave traders exchanged cacao for enslaved Africans in Caracas and exchanged part of the beans for silver in Veracruz. From there, the remaining cacao beans were shipped to Spain and other important European centers.13

Some questions framing the lecture/discussion of this unit are: How did the biology of cacao shape production patterns? Who became the main cacao producers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? What was the place of cacao in the Trans-Atlantic economy?

To explore chocolate consumption in the Americas, the discussion starts with a tasting of champurrado, which uses piloncillo and masa harina. These two ingredients were widely available to the popular classes in Latin America and thus help explain why chocolate consumption was more widespread in the Americas than in Europe. In addition, students analyze casta paintings, excerpts from traveler accounts, and Son Jarocho music—sources that highlight the difference between Latin American and European patterns of chocolate consumption.

The remainder of the class discussion is devoted to the production of cacao in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. The assigned readings examine cacao’s diverse production patterns, labor arrangements, and trade.14 A selection of short clips provides information about the biology of the crop and its cultivation. Using this information, students can infer a number of important features of cacao production such as the limited area suitable for cultivation and, most importantly, the intensive labor requirements of the crop. In turn, this topic leads
to a discussion about slavery and colonial trading patterns, which I support with sources and images from the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (at https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database). By placing cacao production in the larger colonial economy, the analysis addresses important political, economic, and social developments of colonial Latin America. It also helps students think about much larger processes such as mercantilism and the Trans-Atlantic slave system. Through the lens of cacao production and trade, students understand aspects of the organization of colonial empires and some of the forces shaping the relationships between colonies and metropolises.

*Unit 5: Modern Production: The Globalization of Cacao*

In this unit, I provide information about larger processes shaping the modern chocolate industry such as the Industrial Revolution, Latin American independence, and the colonization of Africa. The adoption of technological innovations in chocolate manufacturing during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marks the second most important revolution in chocolate. Modern production methods improved the quality of the finished product and also resulted in diversification and mass production, making chocolate more accessible to the population. Besides the expansion in consumption, technological innovation led to the emergence of modern chocolate companies and reinforced the separation between the countries that specialized in cacao production and those that specialized in chocolate manufacturing. The increase in chocolate consumption put pressure on chocolate manufacturers to find new producing areas for the raw material, but the biology of the tree limited the cacao geography. During the nineteenth century, cultivation spread across the Equator and took over some new areas in the Americas (*Figure 5*), but mostly it extended to Africa (*Figure 6*), where cacao became an important crop in São Tomé, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Nigeria. To force the African population to participate in cacao production, colonial powers developed a large number of coercive mechanisms that included indentured servitude, forced taxation systems, and outright human trafficking.¹⁵

Some of the questions informing the lecture/discussion of this unit are: How did technological innovation affect the demand and production of cacao? How did chocolate companies respond to
increases in demand? How did larger political processes shape cacao production?

The class discussion starts with an analysis of the consequences that modern manufacturing methods had on the production of chocolate. The assigned readings address the modernization of the chocolate industry and the processes that transformed chocolate from a rarity in the early 1700s to a popular food by the late-1800s. In addition to the readings, students watch short clips that illustrate modern manufacturing methods so that they can discuss the impact of technological innovations on cacao demand. The discussion on the modern chocolate industry stresses that mass production did not result in a uniform product. To illustrate this point, students examine the evolution of two American chocolate companies, one located on the East Coast (Hershey) and the other on the West Coast (Ghirardelli). The discussion allows them to identify different business patterns and corporate strategies. As a closing point, I offer samples of both chocolates to show that not all mass-produced chocolate tastes the same.

Figure 5: Trinidad – Sorting Cocoa Beans Plantation, ca. 1900. Men and children extracting beans from cacao pods on the island of Trinidad. Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014718024/>. 
Figure 7: Facing competition from other chocolate companies, Cadbury relied systematically on printed ads to promote the healthfulness of its products, branding its cocoa as “Guaranteed Pure and Soluble” and “Absolutely Pure, Therefore Best.” Digital images uploaded to Wikimedia Commons by various users, from 1885 (top left), 1890 (top right), 1890 (bottom left), and 1891 (bottom right), available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Cadbury_plc_advertisements>.
The History of Chocolate

The next part of the discussion addresses the globalization of cacao production, with an emphasis on production in West Africa. For this part of the class, I present students with excerpts from a 1905 report written by Henry Woodd Nevinson on the serviçal system in São Tomé that uncovered the oppressive scheme developed by the Portuguese authorities to provide labor in cacao plantations. Following this analysis, students watch segments of the documentary *The Dark Side of Chocolate* (2010). This investigative report exposed child labor practices and human trafficking in cacao plantations in the Ivory Coast. In the discussion of both reports, I encourage students to identify the changes and continuities in labor arrangements despite the hundred-year gap. By focusing on the consequences of modern technological processes and increases in cacao demand, students understand important aspects of modern colonization processes, the way colonizers engaged with colonial subjects in the past, and modern corporate behavior and labor issues surrounding the production of cacao today.

Unit 6: Modern Consumption: The New Social Identity of Chocolate

In this unit, I address the changes experienced by the modern chocolate industry from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The technological revolution increased the supply of chocolate and made it more affordable, thus leading to the development of a true mass market for chocolate. The increase in the supply of chocolate meant a rise in the competition among manufacturers to control the market. Initially, advertising helped companies expand their consumer base by revealing to the larger public the qualities and taste of chocolate. The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of more aggressive and focused campaigns that targeted specific groups in society. Companies such as Cadbury and Hershey helped steer consumers into certain directions as chocolate was redefined as an affordable and nutritious product that helped children, women, men, and the elderly (Figure 7). The massification of chocolate consumption was fundamentally based on a clear separation between consumers and producers, which was a main feature of chocolate production throughout the twentieth century. The twenty-first century is opening a new chocolate era in which the barrier consumer/producer is disappearing. Fair trade
practices and sustainability are connecting consumers with producers in a more direct way, creating a bridge between both groups and leading to a more socially just and equitable industry.\textsuperscript{17}

Some questions guiding the lecture/discussion of this unit are: How did chocolate companies respond to competition? How did chocolate advertisement change over time? What can we learn about societies based on their marketing campaigns?

After a general discussion on the relationship between advertising, society, and consumption, I present students with images and clips of chocolate ads from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. The images are supplemented with the assigned readings, which explore the evolution of the advertisement industry with particular emphasis on the changes experienced by representations of chocolate.\textsuperscript{18} The analysis focuses on different marketing campaigns and encourages students to understand them as windows into the societies that produce them.

A significant part of the discussion revolves around Cadbury ads, both in print and on television, as they offer a great tool for students to explore the ideas shaping them. For example, students can visualize the evolution of gender roles by examining campaigns targeting women. Whereas in the early twentieth century, chocolate ads associated femininity with motherhood and domesticity, during the late twentieth century, the focus was on women’s independence and sexuality. Since we are lucky to be in a large metropolitan area, I have been able to invite a chocolate maker to give a guest lecture to the class. The presentation gives students an opportunity to sample artisanal chocolate, but, most importantly, examines important issues such as fair trade, ethical labor practices, sustainability, and the bean-to-bar movement, providing a great way to bring the unit to a close. By analyzing marketing campaigns, the discussion uncovers the role of ads in the massification of chocolate consumption. At a much larger level, the analysis uses chocolate ads as windows to understand many of the values and principles guiding the societies that produced them.

Class Readings, Activities, and Assignments

The biggest challenge that I faced when creating this course was the selection of reading materials and primary sources. The bibliography on chocolate is vast, albeit highly uneven. From textbooks to coffee
table books, every book that I read while preparing for the class included relevant information. The course uses chocolate and cacao to explore Latin American, European, African, and U.S. history topics from pre-modern times to the present, and it was, therefore, difficult to find a textbook that could serve as a backbone for the class. I decided that my lectures would provide background information on the larger historical processes, while the assigned readings would be devoted to specific aspects involving the crop and the commodity. I created a reader with scholarly articles readily accessible through JSTOR and other databases. In addition, I always provide a list of optional literature for those students who feel more at ease when there is a textbook assigned, with the caveat that none of the readings completely covers the wide range of themes addressed in the course.

The class is very dynamic as it follows a lecture/discussion structure that alternates different types of sources and activities. Students are expected to come to class with the readings done. Class discussions revolve around the assigned readings and the additional primary sources that I provide in my presentations. At the end of each unit, I carry out different exercises to assess students’ understanding of the material as well as their writing skills. For example, I ask them to identify what they consider was the most important idea discussed in the session and to write three paragraphs to justify their selection. Another activity asks them to select one of the readings assigned for the discussion, identify the author’s argument, and explain how it supports/contradicts the ideas examined in class. My favorite activity in this category, because it has produced the most insightful short essays so far, consists of a comparative analysis of the different representations of the Oompa-Loompas in Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I present students with images from the book’s 1964, 1973, and 2007 editions, as well as short clips of the 1971 and 2005 films, and ask them to examine the changing portrayals of the characters and the reasons behind the variations.

The class has a number of different assignments that I have alternated from one semester to the other. Overall, the assignments require students to accomplish a significant amount of writing, show their critical thinking skills, work collaboratively, and perform independent research. Here, I introduce four different assignments that I believe have been the most successful.
The first assignment requires that students research the history of a cacao/chocolate recipe that originated before the 1950s. Students investigate the origin of the recipe, the utensils and ingredients used, and the larger historical processes that were taking place at the time the recipe became popular. At the end of the semester, students give oral presentations of their recipes, which in many cases have included tastings of the recipes themselves.

A second assignment that has been very successful attempts to make up for the lack of a central course textbook. This assignment requires that students create a textbook collaboratively. Each student is randomly assigned a topic from a list that we create together throughout the semester and has to write an entry about the specific topic. After the submission deadline, I collect all the entries, edit them, create a single file, add a cover, and print bound copies that I give to students as a gift on the last day of class. Since students are allowed to use this textbook for their final assignment, there is significant buy-in as they all know that they have to produce high-quality essays for the sake of their classmates. Coordination among students is an essential part of this assignment, and I therefore had to change it as a result of COVID-19.

The third assignment takes form in a remote learning modality. Rather than a textbook, students create blogs on chocolate and cacao. Each blog entry consists of a short essay that addresses the individual units examined in the course, focusing not only on chocolate/cacao, but also on the larger historical processes discussed during the semester. Besides encouraging students to think critically about cacao and chocolate in historical context, this assignment provides an opportunity for them to engage with digital platforms—a skill that most of them are very familiar with, but in this case requires operating at a more formal level. An academic blog makes students rethink digital platforms since they have to produce content in a professional way—a competence that, depending on their career path, might prove useful after they graduate.¹⁹

So far, the most successful assignment has been the final exam, which consists of a chocolate iteration of the traditional “Game of the Goose” board game. I ask students to create the rules for the game, but I also provide a gameboard for visualization alongside some basic instructions. The board consists of a track with consecutively numbered spaces that illustrate different cacao/chocolate historical
The spaces are organized in sections following the history of cacao and chocolate production as discussed in the course. Scattered throughout the board are a number of spaces marked in brown (for dark chocolate) and spaces marked in white (for white chocolate). The brown/dark chocolate spaces are reward spaces representing positive aspects of cacao/chocolate that help the player move forward. The white/white chocolate spaces are penalty spaces that reflect negative aspects of cacao/chocolate that force the player to move backward. One space in particular, whose location students choose anywhere on the board, is pink (for ruby chocolate). The pink/ruby chocolate space is considered revolutionary and is the most coveted, as any player who lands in it wins the game automatically.20
The goal of the game is to reach the “Finish” space on the board before the other players do. To move through the track, players take turns and roll dice. Students have to decide how players would move through the board by identifying the reward, penalty, and automatic win spaces. To guarantee they cover all the thematic units of the course, they are required to select one space in each section and have to give each space a specific value. For each of their selections, students write short essays (no shorter than 700 words) analyzing the topic and justifying the value granted to it. This is a fun exercise for them because it does not have the dreaded feel of a final exam. Most importantly, since the essays require that students make clear arguments supporting their choices while demonstrating their knowledge on the topic, the exercise allows for a good assessment of how much they have learned throughout the semester.

One Semester Spin-Off:
“Chocolate and Advertisements in History”

During Fall 2019, while teaching the “History of Chocolate,” I was invited to teach one section of the senior research seminar for the following semester. Since many of the students taking the class with me were graduating seniors, I asked them whether they would be interested in taking a follow-up seminar to keep working on chocolate-related research topics. The response was overwhelmingly positive, so I created a seminar that focused on chocolate advertising during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Students examined chocolate ads and paid particular attention to representations of gender, sex, race, indigenous cultures, and colonialism, in their final papers.

During the first weeks of the semester, the class examined the most relevant aspects in the historical evolution of chocolate. The readings and discussions helped the new students get background on the topic, while the old students refreshed their knowledge. This also gave me a rare opportunity to assess how much students had retained from the previous semester. After revisiting the history of chocolate, the class moved to discussions on the evolution of the advertising industry. Finally, during what ended up being our last face-to-face meeting, students examined a number of chocolate ads from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this meeting, we also discussed strategies to locate primary source material and
find bibliographies for their topics. Following this last meeting, classes were canceled due to COVID-19. The online nature of the sources allowed students to continue working on their projects while I assisted them remotely. Despite the disruption provoked by the pandemic, students produced strong papers with topics ranging from chocolate ads in the Soviet Union, to representations of masculinity in Cadbury ads, to the role of baseball in Hershey’s trade cards. I have repeated this experience with similar positive results. I believe that the strong foundation the course provides in the Fall semester helps students develop good research projects in the Spring semester.

**Conclusion**

The “History of Chocolate” forces cacao and chocolate out of their hidden place in history and provides a different way to approach some important historical processes that took place from the sixteenth century to the present. The class uncovers the role of chocolate and cacao as drivers of global change and transformers of political, social, economic, and cultural processes. The crop and the commodity produced connections that transcended historical eras and geographies. Therefore, their study opens a door for understanding larger historical processes and transformations. The interdisciplinary nature of the readings provides students with an opportunity to make connections between ideas across different disciplinary boundaries, leading to a deeper understanding of large historical processes. The variety of primary and secondary sources promotes student inquiry and reinforces visual literacy and critical thinking skills.

The study of a commodity as relatable as chocolate encourages students’ engagement with the material, thus facilitating and reinforcing the learning process. Analyzing the historical path that transformed chocolate into the most widely consumed snack of the world places the topic in a real-world context that helps students understand history’s role as a discipline that allows individuals and societies to know themselves better. Focusing on cacao and chocolate in the past allows us to appreciate cacao and chocolate in the present and, in turn, plan for a more sustainable cacao and chocolate in the future. By demonstrating its contemporary implications, the history of chocolate raises students’ awareness and transforms them into empowered consumers. Because who doesn’t eat chocolate, after all?
Notes


2. Chapters 9 and 10 of Narrative of Some Things of New Spain offer information about the drinks consumed by the Mexica and the methods to prepare chocolate.

3. In 1502, Ferdinand Columbus related an incident in which a group of Chontal Maya were carrying a cargo of beans (among other commodities) that he described as “almonds.” Scholars have argued that the beans were likely cacao beans because of the desperate attempt to recover some that had fallen off the canoe, clearly indicating their high value. In his famous narrative, The True History of the Conquest of New Spain (1568), Bernal Díaz del Castillo mentioned the use of cacao beans as currency in the market of Tlatelolco, revealing the value that cacao had for market exchanges. Jesuit missionary José de Acosta also devoted one chapter of Natural and Moral History of the Indies (1590) to cacao consumption, classifying chocolate as an addictive stimulant like coca.


6. A quick note on terminology: I use the term “cacao” to refer to the plant, “chocolate” to the processed food in liquid or solid form, and “cocoa” to the powder.


19. This assignment has been extremely successful, so I have adopted it permanently in lieu of the textbook.

20. The color choices for the spaces reflect modern debates about different chocolate varieties. Many chocolate connoisseurs reject white chocolate and do not consider it as real chocolate because it lacks cacao solids and is made of cacao butter, lecithin, sugar, milk, and vanilla only. This explains the choice of a white space as negative. Ruby chocolate is a new chocolate variety released in 2017 and advertised as a revolutionary taste by Swiss-Belgian producer Barry Callebaut, the company behind its creation. The type of cacao beans used to make ruby chocolate is still a secret and there is some controversy about it being real chocolate, although the FDA has issued a temporary permit to market it as chocolate. This explains the choice of a pink space as a revolutionary automatic win. Students are familiar with these debates, as during the first day of class, we play an online Kahoot! game (“How much do you know about chocolate?”) that tests their knowledge of chocolate and cacao, followed by a tasting of different varieties of chocolate.

21. Because of the revolutionary pink space, students are allowed to choose two spaces in one section only.

22. Thirteen out of the sixteen students enrolled in the seminar took “History of Chocolate” in the previous semester.
In 1940, the Teachers’ History Club at the University of Notre Dame created the “Quarterly Bulletin of the Teachers’ History Club” to improve the learning experience in the history classroom.

By 1967, the expanding collaboration of educators reorganized as the History Teachers’ Association and decided to transform the bulletin into an academic journal—The History Teacher.

In 1972, the association transferred guardianship of The History Teacher to coordinating faculty members at the Department of History at California State University, Long Beach. In the interest of independence and self-determination, the associated teachers incorporated as a non-profit organization.

The Society for History Education, Inc. (SHE) was recognized by the State of California in 1972.

In 2012, the Society began offering full-text, open access to recent archives of The History Teacher at its website, thehistoryteacher.org.

In 2014, The History Teacher launched its full-color covers feature, showcasing historical documents on both front and back covers, specifically designed to spark classroom discussion.

In 2021, The History Teacher entered its 55th Volume, and we ask you to join us in celebrating history teachers throughout the world and throughout time.