

Chocolate: Food of the Gods

With the winter holidays approaching, we're likely to consume a lot of chocolate. Studies show we devour more of this treat in winter than any other season. Already feeling guilty? Maybe you shouldn't.

Dark chocolate is full of antioxidants, iron and other beneficial compounds, and research now indicates that it can be (in moderation) part of a heart healthy diet. Fortunately for our sweet tooth, chocolate is also an environmentally friendly food.

Animal, vegetable or mineral?

Chocolate is made from cacao beans, the dried and fermented seeds of the evergreen tree *Theobroma cacao*. As a wild species, the cacao tree originates from the Amazon rainforest and the Andes foothills, and is considered an understory species, which means it grows in the shade of the rainforest canopy.

- Cacao beans, about the size of an olive, were used as currency in early Mesoamerica.
- *Theobroma* in Greek means food of the gods; cacao comes from the Nahuatl word *cacahuatl*.
- Cacao flowers have a single pollinator, a small fly called a midge.
- Most of today's cacao crop is grown in Africa. Hawaii is the only US state that grows cacao to produce chocolate.

Sustainable Chocolate

Chocolate is considered one of the most sustainable of internationally traded commodities. Almost all (90-95%) of the world's cacao is grown by smallholder producers using traditional methods.

- Unlike many plantation crops, cacao can be grown with a diverse mixture of other plants, preserving biodiversity.

- It does best in the shade, so it's not necessary, or desirable, to cut taller trees or clear-cut rainforest.
- Cacao trees need a lot of water, but the shaded high rainfall areas where they grow best eliminate the need for irrigation and high-water consumption.
- Nearby shade trees slow erosion, inhibit weeds, hold in moisture, and reduce the need for pesticides and fertilizers.



Ripening cacao drupes, commonly known as pods, grow directly from the tree's trunk or limbs, and contain the seeds used in chocolate production. The Zoo has a cacao tree... can you find it on your next visit?

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Guilt free Consumption

Some of the biggest chocolate companies in the world, including Hershey, Nestle, and Mars, have committed to utilizing certified and sustainable cocoa. Several certifying organizations, such as Rainforest Alliance, provide independent audits to ensure the highest international standards of environmental and farming practices.

What does all that mean when you want a truffle? Just make sure you are choosing chocolate products made from sustainably grown cacao to ensure that rainforest hasn't been cleared to make way for unsustainable plantations. Visit <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/> to find sustainable products of all kinds, including chocolate. So this winter, enjoy your chocolate with a little less guilt.

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