

## The Bitter Truth about Chocolate

David Marshall, inventor of The Real Easter Egg, reveals the bitter truth about chocolate

A couple of weeks ago I met Joe Osman, the man who helped invent Fairtrade chocolate. Back in the early 1980s he was part of an economic movement which worked with sugar and cocoa growers helping them to develop their farms and offering them a fair price for their produce. They christened the idea 'fair trade' and they changed the world.

Talking of names, the Latin name for the fruit from which chocolate comes is *Theobroma Cacao*, which translates as *Bitter fruit of God*. Bitter because *Cacao* (pronounced ca-cow) is more bitter than lemons. But the bitterness of chocolate is far deeper than its taste and it is a shocking story.

### **More valuable than gold...**

When Columbus 'discovered' South America in 1502 the welcoming natives brought him *Cacao* beans. To them the beans were a highly prized super fruit - full of fat, containing 4000 times more antioxidants than blue berries and, when turned into a sugared chocolate drink, gave those drinking it a choccy high. It was highly addictive and had a mysterious ritualistic role within Mayan and Aztec cultures.

Its mysterious properties were so great that the Catholic church ruled that chocolate could be eaten on fasting Fridays but should be given up for Lent.

So chocolate has always been associated in the European mind with high value and mystical powers.

### **Sexism and racism**

The Spanish ruled large parts of South America from 1521 and the country adopted Catholicism widely. There is a famous story of a bishop who, when visiting his new colonial diocese, discovered the women so addicted to the chocolate that they drank it during church services.

He banned the drinking of chocolate during mass so the women stopped going to church. Eventually, the women sent the bishop a gift of poisoned chocolate and that was the end of him!

This famous story is significant because it is the first time that the addictive, mystical power of chocolate is linked, by authors, specifically to women. This is still an influence on how chocolate is marketed today - think about the Cadbury's Flake adverts.

The poisoned bishop story is also the first time that racism enters the history of chocolate because it was said that only 'ethnic women' were addicted to chocolate - not white Europeans.

Stereotypical images of black people were later used to sell chocolate in Europe - the golliwog and other offensive imagery was used extensively on packaging and in some countries still is.

### **Slavery and trade**

As demand for the South American drink grew across the chocolate houses of 17th century Europe the Church helped the *Cacao* growers organise their farms into plantations. These quickly became forced labour slave plantations. The *Cacao* tree was exported to Africa and plantations developed on the Ivory Coast.

The most bitter truth about chocolate is that it provided the economic template for what was to eventually become the Transatlantic Slave Trade and played a role in developing the unjust economic structures operating in the world today. It is a sad fact that by the time the Transatlantic Slave Trade was abolished it was no longer needed as these unfair economic structures were in place. Freed slaves had few rights, did not own the farms and, if they did, growers were given very little for their *Cacao* and other goods such as cotton, tea, sugar and coffee.

Today on the Ivory Coast millions of *Cacao* farmers still live in poverty. The Fairtrade system works by cutting through the legacy of unfair economic structures. It guarantees growers a minimum price for their goods, regardless of market trends and growers receive a cash premium to invest in their community. Companies like Traidcraft take the idea further, working with growers to empower, improve and develop stable trading communities.

It is a difficult battle, though. Slavery was discovered to be operating in chocolate farms as recently as last year. It is also still acceptable for manufacturers to offer only a small percentage of goods that are labelled Fairtrade. And brands such as Rain Forest Alliance, which some argue offer little economic benefit, are now competing with Fairtrade and there is a risk of consumer confusion.

### **Meaningful Chocolate**

Well, now you know the bitter truth of chocolate-its connection to sexism, racism, slavery and its role in developing unjust trade.

When shopping, remember the bitter legacy of chocolate and buy Fairtrade or order through Traidcraft. Remember also Joe Osman and the early pioneers of fair trade chocolate who proved that the way we shop can change the world.

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