

Theobroma Cacao- Food for the Gods

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Theobroma Cacao is the botanical name for the cacao tree. Its Latin translation is "food for the gods".



I agree...one of the food items I enjoy working with the most because of its versatility, is without a doubt, chocolate. From its humble beginnings to modern day top-of-the-line food, chocolate has, in many ways, touched and influenced the lives of people all over the world. I like to think of Cacao Beans as a gift of nature; and the craftsmanship and ingenuity of countless men and women who, throughout the centuries, worked endlessly to transform the cacao bean into the delicacy we now know as chocolate, as one of the greatest culinary gifts to human kind.

Cacao beans were first harvested and used by the Mayan and Aztec Kingdoms as a type of currency and they were also used to prepare a beverage called *xocolatl* (chocolate). They were believed to possess aphrodisiac qualities and the beverage was thought to bring strength and vitality to those who drank it, therefore, not everyone had access to this delightful elixir which was anything but delightful.

The taste of *xocolatl*, was quite different than the taste of the sweet, frothy hot chocolate we indulge ourselves with these days. It used to be served as a cold beverage. It was reddish in color, spicy (hot!) and bitter because chili peppers, Mexican black peppercorns, cornmeal, vanilla and achiote (a spice, also known as annatto –used as food coloring) were used to concoct it, but no sugar was added. All these ingredients would be grinded together obtaining a paste that would then be compacted to form a ball or a disk, and set to dry. The ball or disk would then

be dissolved in water and hand stirred with a whisk-like device until totally dissolved, smooth and foamy at the top.

The components of the Mexican chocolate disks have changed a bit over time. Spices such as black peppercorns and chili peppers have been dropped and others such as cinnamon and cloves have been added. Sugar was also incorporated into the blend, giving it the sweet taste we all love.

These chocolate disks can be easily found in any supermarket store such as Wegman's in the international food aisles. My personal favorite brand is Chocolate Abuelita, but other brands such as Ibarra or Cortes are just as good.

To make four servings of Mexican style hot chocolate, you'll need 3 cups of water, 6 oz. of chopped up Mexican chocolate (they come in 3.1 oz. disks, so use 2) and 2 oz. of whipping or heavy cream. Place the water and chocolate in medium sized saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium heat constantly stirring until the chocolate dissolves. Remove from heat, place in a blender and mix on high until liquid is smooth and frothy. Then add the cream and blend some more. Serve in mugs.

If you decide to be more adventurous, hand-froth it! This method is preferred by many people including myself. You'll need a *molinillo* if you have one (this is a very unique tool, somewhat like a wooden whisk), or don't shy away from using a balloon whisk. Once the chocolate and water mixture have simmered and the chocolate is dissolved, use the whisk or *molinillo* to mix the beverage until smooth and frothy by vigorously rolling the handle of the *molinillo* or whisk between your hands. Before serving, add the cream and stir some more. Once it's served in the mug, for a kick, sprinkle (just a little bit!) of cayenne pepper powder on top.

Now that we have indulged ourselves with delights from the past, let's treat ourselves with a modern-day delicacy: Chocolate Mousse. Undoubtedly from

France, this splendid dessert is a true winner... loved by old and young alike! My favorite chocolate mousse recipe belongs to my late grandmother, Flora; daughter of



German-Polish immigrants, she was born in Mexico City in the 1920's. She was a woman who understood chocolate and knew how to work with it very well. She prepared some 'wicked' chocolate desserts. I can't help but think of her



every time I prepare one of her recipes, always smiling with approval.

I'm particularly fond of the way she prepared this dessert. She would always say that the dessert is only as good as the chocolate you use. Although I agree to some extent, I have personally tried this recipe with many different brands of chocolate and the results are still fantastic. I personally prefer to work with either the Ghirardelli semi-sweet or dark chocolate bars or the dark chocolate from Lindt. You can find them at Premier Gourmet or in local grocery stores.

For those of you that enjoy organic treats, try the following recipe with semi-sweet or dark chocolate bars from Terra Nostra. This is a good organic chocolate to work with and you can purchase it at the Lexington Co-op. Make sure though, that whatever your selection of chocolate might be, it must not contain any type of nuts, fruits or bits & pieces of other stuff, such as candies or toffee and absolutely no fillings.

Chocolate Mousse is a fun and wonderful dessert to prepare, not to mention the bliss you are likely to experience while eating it. I hope you enjoy making this recipe and eating too!

Chef's note: When following a written recipe, always make sure to read through it before you begin preparing it.

Flora's Chocolate Mousse (serves 8)

8 oz dark or semi-sweet chocolate · **3 tbsp** butter · **1/2 cup** confectioners sugar · **8** eggs, whites and yolks separated · **1/8 tsp** cream of tartar or salt

Separate egg white from egg yolks. Place egg whites in mixing bowl, preferably

stainless steel, and set aside. Place egg yolks in small container until ready to use.

Melt the chocolate in a small saucepan over a simmering water bath (make sure the chocolate doesn't get "splattered" with water because the chocolate will be ruined, even one drop will do it). Stir with wooden spoon gently as chocolate is melting. Once the chocolate is melted, turn off the stove, but keep the saucepan in the water bath. Add the butter to the chocolate and let melt while stirring constantly and gently. When butter has melted, add one egg yolk at a time while stirring a bit more vigorously, taking care that each of the 8 egg yolks incorporate well into the chocolate mixture. Remove from water bath and set aside to cool to lukewarm. Chocolate mixture should be soft, smooth and look silky (if it hardens like a rock you can bet some water managed to make its way into it).

Now beat the egg whites and cream of tartar (or salt) with an electric hand-held mixer until stiff peaks start forming. At that point, add the confectioners' sugar and keep beating until well incorporated and egg whites are forming stiff peaks. Useful tip: Egg whites won't stiffen and peak if they have even a tiny hint of egg yolk in them.

Using a very "light-hand" and a soft plastic spatula, gently fold chocolate mix into egg whites until everything is evenly incorporated.

To serve, pour into individual glass cups or glass bowl. Refrigerate until ready to serve. You can decorate with white or dark chocolate shavings.

This dessert is best when eaten on the day it was made. My suggestion is that it be consumed within 48 hours. Keep refrigerated.



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