Chocolate changes shape
Chocolate is probably best known in solid or bar form, but it wasn’t always this way. In fact, for more than 90% of its history, chocolate was consumed only as a beverage.

The first conclusive evidence of chocolate consumption dates from the Classic Period of the Ancient Maya of Mexico and Central America (250-900 CE). The Maya made it into a spicy drink that they used in ceremonies. Among the ancient Maya, chocolate was enjoyed by rich and poor alike. A particular favorite of Maya kings and priests, chocolate played a special part in royal and religious ceremonies. When ancient Maya aristocrats served chocolate drinks, they used lavishly decorated vessels made by specially trained artists. On storage jars and drinking vessels intended for the elite, artists painted religious and courtly scenes. Some vessels show images of gods and animals, or even kings drinking chocolate. In the palaces of Maya kings, the frothy chocolate drink was a treasured treat. And at sacred altars, Maya priests presented cacao seeds as offerings to the gods. Priests also prepared chocolate as a drink for special religious ceremonies.
The Maya were part of a trade network that included cacao and extended well beyond the territory they occupied (Maya lands covered parts of southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and western Honduras). Long after the height of their political power, during the later Maya Post Classic Period (AD 900-1519), the ancient Maya supplied cacao to other Middle American people, such as the Aztecs (AD 1428-1521) of central Mexico, where the climate was too cool and dry to grow cacao. Cacao became an important product of the vast trade empire of the Aztec people—not only as a luxury drink, but as money, an offering to the gods, and tribute to rulers. In fact, the seeds were so valuable that dishonest merchants are believed to have made clay counterfeits. Aztec rulers also required ordinary citizens and conquered peoples to pay a tax or tribute to them. Because cacao was so valuable, conquered peoples who lived in cacao—growing areas often paid tribute with cacao seeds. Why was cacao so valuable to the Aztecs? In part, its value lay in the fact that the Aztecs couldn’t grow it themselves and that they had to trade for it over long distances. In Maya lands south of their own, Aztec traders filled woven backpacks with cacao, then hauled this precious cargo on foot to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan (ten noch teet LAN), today the site of Mexico city.

Like the Maya, the Aztec also used cacao to create a beverage. But other than the Aztec elite—rulers, priests, decorated warriors, and honored merchants—few had the means to savor the precious drink.
In 1519, Hernando Cortés led Spanish soldiers to the Aztec capital in search of golden treasures in the Americas. Instead, they found storerooms packed with valuable cacao seeds. In 1521, Spain defeated the Aztec and changed their way of life forever. Contact between the Spaniards and peoples of the Americas affected the rest of the world too. It opened a gateway for the exchange of ideas and technology, and a new market in Europe for foods like cacao. Chocolate was one of many native American foods the Spanish explorers fancied. Sailing home, they filled their ships not just with cacao, but also with corn, chile peppers, vanilla, and tomatoes. Soon Europeans were cooking with ingredients from all around the globe.
Not long after cacao arrived in Europe, someone added sugar, a sweetener unavailable to the Aztec and Maya. Chocolate from the Americas and sugar, originally from Papua, New Guinea, were treasured imports in Europe. But high import taxes meant that few people could afford to indulge in them. In Spain, people couldn’t get enough of this new drink, which had never been tasted before outside the Americas. Travelers visiting Spain from Germany, France, England, Holland, and Italy returned home with tales—and samples—of this new drink. Before a century had passed, many wealthy Europeans had tasted cacao . . . and wanted more. After falling in love with chocolate, the English, Dutch, and French set out to grow cacao in colonized lands near the equator. Soon they were shipping cacao back home to supply Europe with this luxurious treat. For the next 200 years, these political powers struggled for control of “new” lands brimming with coveted resources like cacao.

By the early 1700s, sweetened chocolate had become a favorite of European upper classes. Like the elaborate ceramic vessels of Maya and Aztec kings, Europeans used special dishes for drinking chocolate. These special dishes, similar to the Maya and Aztec, were symbols of wealth. Chocolate houses of the 1600s and 1700s were gathering places for mostly men to enjoy a hot drink, discuss politics, socialize, and gamble. The first chocolate house opened in London in 1657. Within 50 years, London’s chocolate houses numbered nearly 2,000. As the demand for chocolate skyrocketed, so did the demand for sugar to sweeten it. Between the 1700s and 1888, keeping up with the increasing demand for sugar to sweeten chocolate required the labor of millions of people to tend, harvest, and process sugar cane.
Throughout the 16th century, most cacao continued to be cultivated in the Pacific coastal zones of southern Mexico and Central America. This production depended upon local laborers, until the Native population was drastically reduced by the spread of European diseases. To replace this Native labor force and continue cultivating crops, with sugar being one of the foremost, many colonial landowners relied upon the system of African slavery established by European and Arab merchants. Many of the products of this time were labor-intensive crops. Colonial landowners needed a large workforce to meet European demand for indigo (dye), tobacco, cotton, sugar, and at times even for cacao itself. A combination of wage laborers and enslaved peoples were used to create that workforce—including tens of thousands of men, women, and children.

Although slavery was abolished in all countries by 1888, the need for labor to meet the demand for products like sugar and cacao continued. In some tropical countries harsh labor conditions prevailed long after the end of slavery. However, some activists in the world of chocolate spoke up to change these conditions.

In 1910, Cadbury invited several English and American chocolate companies to join him in refusing to buy cacao from these plantations until working conditions improved. That same year, a United States Congressional hearing resulted in a formal U.S. ban on any cacao shown to be the product of slave labor from these plantations. Even today, the news that some West African cacao farms may use child labor unites international governments, nonprofit organizations, and chocolate companies against such practices.

An international program to study labor practices on 3,000 farms in Ivory Coast and Ghana began in the fall of 2001. It will take time to assess labor conditions and develop an effective solution that supports the millions of farmers depending upon cacao for their livelihood and at the same time stop the criminal exploitation of children. Other suggestions to address the problem of child labor situation include labeling chocolate produced without child labor or boycotting West African cacao. Labeling would be difficult to monitor because there are over 600,000 small cacao farms in Ivory Coast, and a boycott could devastate the economy of West African countries.

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Cacao seeds grow on trees, but chocolate bars have to be made by hand or by machine. The Industrial Revolution was a turning point for chocolate as a steady stream of technological innovations and creative advertising brought chocolate bars to the masses. While inventions made chocolate easier to produce, advertising opened up new markets by making it something people craved. As chocolate products became cheaper to make and buy, advertisers introduced marketing campaigns aimed at more people. Today you can buy chocolate in almost every country around the world. Just about anyone you speak to has feelings about chocolate, but it means different things to people in different parts of the world. For some it is a decadent treat, for others an important source of income, and for others still it is a critical component of ritual and celebration.