### Fascinating Facts

**About the cacao tree**

1. The seed pods of the cacao tree grow not on the end of its branches, but directly off the branches and the trunk.

2. Each pod is about the size of a pineapple and holds thirty to fifty seeds—enough to make about seven milk chocolate or two dark chocolate bars.

3. Cacao flowers are pollinated by midges, tiny flies that live in the rotting leaves and other debris that fall to the forest floor at the base of the tree. Those midges have the fastest wingbeats in the world: 1,000 times per second!

4. Farmed cacao trees today are endangered by natural threats, such as the witch’s broom fungus and other diseases and pests. Along with the rest of the rainforest, their wild counterparts are threatened by lumber companies, which harvest the taller trees that shelter the cacao and help maintain the cacao’s fragile ecosystem.

5. Cacao seeds are not sweet. They contain the chemicals caffeine and theobromine, which give them a bitter taste.

6. The scientific name of the cacao tree, *Theobroma*, means “food of the gods.”

7. Cacao is not related to the coconut palm or to the coca plant, the source of cocaine.

8. Africa is now the source of more than half the world’s cacao, while Mexico today provides only 1.5 percent.

**Chocolate as food and medicine**

1. It takes 4 cacao seeds to make 1 ounce of milk chocolate, and 12 seeds to make 1 ounce of dark chocolate.

2. Although we tend to think of chocolate as a solid today, for 90% of its history it was consumed in liquid form.

3. Some of the earliest European cocoa-makers were apothecaries seeking medicinal uses of the plant.

4. Cacao seeds contain significant amounts of naturally occurring flavonoids, substances also found in red wine, green tea, and fruits and vegetables; flavonoids are connected with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

5. On the other hand, chocolate carries a heavy load of saturated fats and calories; there are much healthier ways to get the same benefits.

6. Chocolate contains two stimulants also found in coffee—caffeine and *theobromine*—but in relatively small amounts. Fifty M&Ms, for example, have about as much caffeine as a cup of decaffeinated coffee.

**Who eats chocolate?**

1. Not many Africans. A great deal of chocolate is grown in Africa, but mostly for export.

2. Not a lot of Asians. Although chocolate’s popularity is growing in China and Japan, there’s still comparatively little chocolate culture in Asia. The Chinese, for example, eat only one bar of chocolate for every 1,000 eaten by the British.

3. Mexicans consume chocolate more as a traditional drink and a spice than as a candy. They use it to make one variety of the wonderful sauce called mole and offer chocolate drinks at many social gatherings.
4 Americans for sure...an average of 12 pounds per person per year. In 1998, that came to a total of 3.3 billion pounds. (Americans spend $13 billion a year on chocolate.)

5 Definitely Europeans! As far back as the late 1700s, the people of Madrid, Spain consumed nearly 12 million pounds of chocolate a year. Today, 15 of the 16 leading per-capita chocolate-consuming countries are in Europe, with Switzerland leading the pack. (The U.S., as of 1998, was #9.)

For the love of chocolate...the chocolate of love

Does chocolate stimulate the libido? Chemists can’t prove it, but popular culture is reluctant to give up the belief...

- As far back as the 1000 CE, frothy chocolate drinks were exchanged at weddings in Mesoamerica (southern Mexico and parts of Central America).
- Casanova is said to have eaten chocolate to enhance his love-making.
- The Marquis de Sade also was passionate about chocolate, and had his wife send it to him in prison.
- Why else do Americans exchange chocolate on Valentine’s Day?