

Chocolate: From Bean to Bar

*The New Taste of Chocolate:
A Cultural and Natural History of Cacao with Recipes*
Maricel E. Presilla
Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001
ix, 198 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth)

Chocolate: The Nature of Indulgence
Ruth Lopez
New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002
143 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth)

Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate
Susan J. Terrio
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000
xiii, 313 pp. Illustrations. \$22.50 (paper)

WHEN I LIVED IN GUADELOUPE in the French Antilles, in my backyard stood a majestic mango tree that was the nocturnal home to voracious bats (*gyenbo* in Creole). Under the shade of the *manguier* grew a mysterious plant that produced a large, orange-yellow pod shaped much like a papaya. It was a *cacaoyer*, or cacao tree. On my way into town, for nine francs I used to buy cylinder-shaped, unsweetened chocolate from a local woman, but I never ventured to ask how the pods filled with cacao beans and sweet-tart ivory pulp turned into the *baton kako* (“cacao stick”) that I would later grate into powder to make Katharine Hepburn brownies for my neighbors in Capesterre Belle-Eau. (Alice B. Toklas brownies were not *de rigueur* in the French islands in the mid-eighties.) With the arrival of these three books, my curiosity about chocolate is finally satisfied.

The authors write on chocolate from very different perspectives. Maricel Presilla is a culinary historian, president of Gran Cacao, a Latin American food marketing company, and now chef/co-owner of Zafra, a pan-Latin restaurant in Hoboken, New Jersey; Ruth Lopez is a journalist who has written extensively about art and culture for a variety of publications; and Susan Terrio is a professor of French and Anthropology at Georgetown University. Together the books fill out the story of chocolate from farmer to consumer,

passing by way of manufacturer and *chocolatier*. Presilla follows the life of a cacao pod through harvest, fermentation, roasting, and its eventual transformation into what we know as chocolate. Her lively interest in and knowledge of cacao and chocolate were nurtured during her childhood in Santiago, Cuba, through visits to her grandmother’s farm, and then enhanced by empirical research for the book, which took her all over the world and brought her to well-placed individuals in the chocolate trade and industry. Archival research rather than first-hand accounts informs Lopez’s work, which treats different aspects of the history of chocolate—its Mesoamerican origins, the processing of cacao into chocolate, the connection between chocolate and war, the chocolate business in America, and, finally, the future of chocolate and of the endangered rain forest. To this mix Lopez adds political and ecological issues, though not altogether successfully. Her narrative covers a great expanse of place and time, with themes that may be interconnected but appear somewhat disjointed in her telling. Anthropologist Terrio unveils the fine craft of artisanal *chocolatiers* centered in southwest France, where she conducted ethnographic research in eight craft businesses in the Basque Coast towns of Bayonne, Biarritz, and Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

The books are aimed at different markets. Presilla’s *New Taste of Chocolate* was displayed at New York’s Fourth Chocolate Show in November 2001; it includes abundant photographs and illustrations, along with fifty pages of appealing recipes (among them *Bill Yosses’s Soft Chocolate Cake with Banana-Raisin Sauce and Lime Cream*, *Wayne Brachman’s Pecan-Guaranda Chocolate Tart with Mango and Papaya*, *Laurent Tourondel’s Cacao Nib Wafers and Rich Custard Cream with Lavender-Vanilla Syrup*, *Mary Cech’s Onyx Chocolate-Coconut Soup with Fresh Bananas and Honey-Cocoa Wafers*). Lopez’s work, published in conjunction with The Field Museum of Chicago, accompanies a major exhibition on chocolate that will travel over the next four years to museums in Los Angeles, Honolulu, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Raleigh, and San Diego. Terrio’s opus may be a harder sell, for it is featured at neither food nor museum shows. Pitched to a more erudite readership with an interest in anthropology, food and/or cultural studies, and life in



contemporary France, her study of the craft community of *chocolatiers* in the Basque region and Paris moves easily among theory, ethnography, history, and vignettes.

From the rain forest to the candy counter, from bean to bar, the story of how chocolate traveled from the tropics to urban consumers—and was transformed in the process from seed to powder to cream—is a fascinating tale. The story begins in Mesoamerica with the Mayans and Aztecs, who cultivated the tree known as *theobroma cacao* (“food of the gods”) for its use as a ritual drink and a valuable resource in trade. After the conquest of Mexico, chocolate was introduced to Europe, but its manufacture remained a secret of the Spanish court for almost one hundred years. When the other powers, such as France, England, and Holland, were introduced to this new beverage in the era of European colonial mercantilism, cacao beans became a much sought-after foreign commodity, along with sugar, coffee, tea, and spices. In time (though not until the nineteenth century), chocolate came to be considered a food as well as a drink, transformed by the addition of sugar and milk. The manufacture of chocolate is now a multi-billion dollar industry, and “cocoa” is a valuable product on the commodities market.

Though indigenous to the New World, cacao was transplanted to the Old World and is now cultivated in places

Venezuelan cacao workers. From Maricel E. Presilla, *The New Taste of Chocolate: A Cultural and Natural History of Cacao with Recipes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001), p.33.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARICEL E. PRESILLA ©2002

like Ghana, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast—as well as points south and east, such as Madagascar, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Ironically, its cultivation and production involve laborers whose very ancestors were forcibly transported as slaves to the Caribbean and Brazil in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to work the sugar, coffee, and cacao plantations that served Europe’s new taste for luxury goods and stimulants. Hence the circulation of goods has mirrored a circulation of labor.

The story of chocolate includes all kinds of history—natural, social, and economic. One can follow the evolution of taste for a newly discovered drink as it moves from being an exclusive item of the upper classes and aristocracy—such as the taking of morning chocolate in bed or the rise of chocolate houses in the seventeenth century—and expands into the working and lower classes. Terrio’s study of the social production of taste in the invention of vintage *grand cru* chocolates lends support to the late Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of consumption. But not all is a happy tale of luxury

and indulgence, as the book titles might suggest. Only Lopez touches upon the relationship of chocolate to slavery, colonialism, and war (as a military ration) and alludes to how, during the 1990–91 Gulf War, corporate battles were fought among chocolate giants over their market share in the war.

For anthropologists and historians, the cultural and social histories of chocolate are fascinating. Many countries in the tropics grow and sell cacao to the world market (the rain forest is the only environment where the tree grows), but few have any cultural connection to it, writes Lopez (p. 16). Similarly, we as consumers are cut off from the origins of the three cacao varieties—*criollo*, *trinitario*, or *forestero*—used in the processing of the chocolate we buy, whether this be in the form of a mundane chocolate candy bar or the premium chocolate handcrafted by the French *chocolatiers* described so masterfully by Terrio. Thus, in this imbalanced equation of increasing globalization, the Others produce what they don't consume, and, sadly, the Self consumes without knowing the product's real provenance.

Yet the question of visibility or connectedness quickly becomes complicated. The cacao pods, whose shapes are as startling as their colors, are undeniably beautiful: “the pods can range from bright green to pale yellow, dark purple to burnt orange or crimson. [...] Some seem to be sculpted with ridges, furrows, craters, or warts; others are smooth and shiny as if enameled or rough-skinned and dappled with dark spots. [...] A cacao fruit can be as round as a melon or as long as an enormous teardrop” (Presilla, p.45). Yet laborers on the cacao plantations today are likely not so enthralled by the beauty of the plant, given its particular cultural and symbolic meanings for them. Even so, advertisers and manufacturers increasingly use Black bodies to sell products, including chocolate. For example, English speakers may not be aware that the French cocoa brand Banania has used the image of a Senegalese *tirailleur* or rifleman—a kind of analogue to Aunt Jemima, with thick lips, a wide grin, and a red cap against a yellow background—with the slogan “*Y'a bon*” (“Is good!”) in *petit-nègre* to sell their breakfast product throughout France and its (former) colonies.

Each book contains enough morsels of interesting facts to tempt any reader. Well-made chocolate actually consists of hundreds of different substances present in the cacao seed, but chemists have been unable to manufacture a decent synthetic substitute. Fermentation changes cacao: the longer the bean ferments with the pulp, the better the flavor and the higher the cost. Roasting the cacao beans ultimately determines the flavor and color of the resulting chocolate. (The husks that are removed from the “nibs” after roasting are the very cocoa bean husks that I use as

mulch in my garden.) While the harvesting and preparation of cacao beans have remained basically unchanged over the years, we learn how various inventions in the nineteenth century revolutionized the processing of chocolate. For example, the cacao press developed by the Dutchman Van Houten in 1828 made chocolate smoother by extracting some of the cacao (cocoa) butter from the “cacao liquor,” the ground mass of cocoa beans from chocolate processing. Later, the various techniques of “conching,” “tempering,” and “dutching”—explained in all of the texts under review—affected the appearance, texture, flavor, and color of the chocolate. White chocolate isn't considered real chocolate, for it contains only cacao butter and milk, not the chocolate solids. And it is cacao butter, which exhibits several different crystal forms on solidifying after being melted, that presents great technical difficulties for cooks and confectioners of chocolate. Now, in the age of genetic engineering, the Cacao Research Unit in Trinidad, part of the original Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (now known as the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine), supports researchers who clone varieties of cacao that are resistant to disease or particularly productive or that possess fine flavor.

In the United States, where hot chocolate has become a mass-market, marshmallow-laden drink for children, it is difficult to envision the beverage as a delicacy for the top stratum of European society, or even to understand fully the small group of French *chocolatiers* who work in a centuries-old craft that is currently experiencing intense international competition. Yet from the variety of disciplines interwoven in these three books—archaeology, botany, conservation, cultural anthropology, history, economics, and ecology—we are able to gain a fuller appreciation of chocolate's dominant position in both popular culture and gastronomy. Nonetheless, I still would like to know the relationship between women and chocolate—after all, the authors are all of the fairer sex! And while I may have tested the recipe for *Fran Bigelow's Deep Chocolate Torte* (Presilla, p.136) on recent dinner guests, I'm not quite ready to wear the chocolate dress that was on display at this year's chocolate show in New York—at least not in this 100° heat in which I write. ☺

REFERENCES

- Raymond Bachollet, et al., *NéгриPub: l'image des Noirs dans la publicité*. Paris: Éditions Somogy, 1992.
- Mireille Rosello, “Aimé Césaire and Banania Are Eighty Years Old: Poetry, Advertisement, and Colonial Encounters.” *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies* 3 (1994/95): 339–351.