

Chocolatiere Connections: Prestige and Culture in the Early Modern Atlantic

Nathan Allison

Commodities played an integral role in the shaping forces of the Atlantic World. Chocolate is a true trans-Atlantic commodity. From the cultivation of cocoa beans, its shipment and trade, its production into chocolate, and its consumption, chocolate exemplifies Atlantic World connections through commodities. Exploring chocolate as a commodity from the late sixteenth century to the eighteenth century demonstrates a commodity chain that interconnected the Atlantic World through its production and consumption. Subsequently, links across the Atlantic allowed cultural ideas and practices to move from people and places. Evidence from advertisements, state records, and material culture vividly illustrate the extensive role prestige goods played in this network. Furthermore, studying the accoutrement of chocolate gives insight to the spread of culturally significant trends throughout the Atlantic. This paper will also explore the use of chocolate pots in France, England, and colonial America during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in order to analyze and explore cultural practices in these regions and the relationship between their cultures. This evidence exemplifies the connectivity of people and places in the Atlantic World by looking at the spread of a chocolate culture through the tools necessary for its production and consumption.

Cocoa's introduction to Europeans began with the arrival of Columbus to the Americas. The Aztec and Maya had a long tradition of drinking chocolate in connection with spiritual practices. Spanish conquistadors witnessed this and wrote of it in their accounts of contact with the indigenous people in the Americas. However, commoditization of chocolate in a greater Atlantic context is somewhat ambiguous. The first account of chocolate being introduced into Europe was by the conquistador de la Casas. In 1544, Dominican friars and a delegation of Kekchi Maya nobles sent by de la Casas visited the royal court of Philip II of Spain, bringing many exotic gifts from the Americas including chocolate.¹ Finally in 1585 the first shipment of cocoa beans arrived in Seville from Veracruz.² For the next hundred years, the Spanish controlled cocoa imports into Europe. Cocoa imports came from Spanish colonies in the Americas to Spain via the port of Cadiz.³

¹ Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 133.

² Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 133.

³ Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 80.

The success of chocolate occurred at this time. The consumption of chocolate began in the royal courts of the Spanish and mansions of the wealthy. It was consumed as a hot beverage similar to native traditions in the Americas. The exotic drink drove Spanish and Portuguese merchants to see opportunity in cocoa production, leading to the establishment of cocoa plantations in the Americas. The cocoa tree or *Theobroma Cacao* only grows within twenty degrees of the equator below one thousand feet in elevation.⁴ The Portuguese were the first to take advantage of their territorial acquisitions and established cocoa plantations on the coast of Brazil at Bahia.⁵ As the demand for cocoa grew throughout Europe, roughly ten percent of African slaves transported across the Atlantic went to work in Brazilian cocoa plantations.⁶

Over a short period, European demand for chocolate created multiple variations of cocoa. By the seventeenth century, two forms of cocoa had been introduced into the market- the preferred *Caracas* type from Socunusco and Venezuela and the *Forestaro* from the Guayaquil coast in Ecuador, which was a hardier variety with a stronger flavor.⁷ Venezuela ultimately became the chief exporter of European cocoa through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Forestaro* cocoa became known as the “cocoa of the poor”, and provided colonies with cheap cocoa for the production of chocolate.⁸ Success of the Spanish and Portuguese initiated Dutch and English privateers to work directly with Venezuelan merchants and planters to illegally acquire cocoa. This contraband included cocoa confiscated from Spanish flotillas. In 1655, the British confiscated Jamaica from the Spanish.⁹ Previously operating cocoa walks or plantations in Jamaica were subsequently taken over by the British. The French Antilles islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe also produced cocoa for the metropolitan market in France. The saturation of cocoa into the European market drove cocoa prices down, resulting in chocolate becoming accessible to a much broader consumer base.

The cultivation of cocoa beans in colonial territories of the Americas was but one link along chocolate’s extensive Atlantic commodity chain. The consumption of chocolate highlights the second part of this commodity chain. By 1660 tracts were being printed in

⁴ Sarah Moss and Alexander Badenoch, *Chocolate: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 7.

⁵ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate*, 29.

⁶ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate*, 29.

⁷ Coe and Coe, *True History of Chocolate*, 189.

⁸ Coe and Coe, *True History of Chocolate*, 188.

⁹ Coe and Coe, *True History of Chocolate*, 197.

London on the medicinal benefits of chocolate. One tract stated that “by this pleasing drink health is preserved and sickness is diverted”.¹⁰ Included in the author’s benefits of drinking chocolate is where and by whom chocolate was being sold by in London. Having moved from the elite houses of court officials and nobles, chocolate arrived in the public sphere as a luxury good. In the later part of the seventeenth century, chocolate houses were established across England and became a meeting place for men. Chocolate was beginning to intertwine itself into the cultural milieu of European life.

By the 1760s and 1770s, watermills were put to use to grind the imported cocoa beans in England. However, the consumption of chocolate largely maintained the use of its original indigenous techniques of grinding the cocoa beans on a *metate* a stone grinding table and grinder and chocolate beaters or *molinillos* to create the recognizable foam at the top of the drink through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.¹¹ In France, the cultural prestige of chocolate within the elite homes of the aristocracy led to the development of couture chocolate pots called *chocolatiers* being introduced into the market.¹² The proliferation of chocolate consumption in England and the rest of Europe quickly moved back across the Atlantic to Britain’s colonies in North America.

During the 1700s, cocoa was a highly demanded luxury good being imported into the American colonies by Britain. Luxury goods like cocoa were highly taxed. The “Three Way Trade System” that had developed across the Atlantic allowed Britain to capitalize on its profits from luxury goods like cocoa being imported to the colonies. Ultimately, the taxation of luxury goods like cocoa led American merchants to trade directly with Caribbean cocoa planters by the mid-1750s.¹³ In 1765, John Hannan opened the first chocolate mill in North America, located in Dorchester, Massachusetts.¹⁴ By the later part of the eighteenth century, cocoa production was taking place in four major colonial American cities; Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and New Port.¹⁵ Cocoa production and consumption in America was being controlled in practice by the colonies. In the five year period from 1768-

¹⁰ Anon, *The Vertues of Chocolate East-India Drink*, in the Early English Books Online, <http://proxy.library.eiu.edu:2154/search> (accessed March 10, 2012).

¹¹ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate: A Global History*, 50

¹² Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 161

¹³ Marcia and Frederic Morton, *Chocolate, an Illustrated History* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 33.

¹⁴ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate*, 51

¹⁵ James Gay, “Chocolate Production and Uses in 17th and 18th Century North America,” In *Chocolate: History, Culture, Heritage*, Louis Grivetti and Howard Shapiro, eds., (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 285.

1773, seventy percent of American cocoa was imported from foreign origins while only twenty percent came from British controlled West Indies.¹⁶

For example, Philadelphia became the second largest producer of cocoa in the colonies. *The Pennsylvania Gazette* contained numerous advertisements for cocoa producers and chocolate makers during this period. One advertisement for a store owned by a Benjamin Jackson and John Gibbons stated, "CHOCOLATE, in the very best Manner, which they will sell at very reasonable Rates: Likewise grind up COCOA NUTS for others."¹⁷ Over the five years from 1768-1773, Philadelphia imported nearly six hundred thousand pounds of cocoa and exported only seventy five thousand.¹⁸ We can infer from these figures that Philadelphia and the surrounding areas were consuming nearly all the cocoa being imported into the colony; equating a high demand for chocolate within the colonial culture.

In roughly two hundred and fifty years, chocolate had become a highly desired commodity. The cultivation of cocoa beans established by the Spanish and Portuguese in the New World created a mass European market for the consumption of chocolate. This consumption traversed imperial designations. As evidenced, chocolate became a luxury good that Britain profited on by exporting it to its American colonies. Once there, consumption of chocolate fueled the production of cocoa in places like Philadelphia. Following the commodity chain of chocolate demonstrates the connectivity of the Atlantic world. Chocolate clearly shows that a greater trans-Atlantic network facilitated the cultivation, shipment, production, and consumption of the commodity.

Chocolate Culture

As a rich hot beverage, chocolate found its place in the royal courts of the Spanish and French.¹⁹ Chocolate was served from highly ornate serving pots into specialized cups and their accompanying dishes. The marquise de Sevigne, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal expressed her concern for her daughter's clear disadvantage: "but you have no chocolatiere [chocolate pot]; I have thought of it a thousand times; what will you do?"²⁰ The marquise's words demonstrate a widespread use of chocolate

¹⁶ Gay, "Chocolate Productions Uses in the 17th and 18th Century North America," 289.

¹⁷ *The Pennsylvania Gazette, Benjamin Jackson, and John Gibbons, at Their Mustard and Chocolate*, in the Accessible Archives, <http://proxy.library.eiu.edu:2202> (accessed March 10, 2012).

¹⁸ Gay, *Chocolate Production and Uses in 17th and 18th Century North America*, 289.

¹⁹ Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 125.

²⁰ Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 158.

pots in the homes of aristocrats by the end of the seventeenth century. Aggressive cultivation of cocoa trees in the Antilles by the Spanish and Portuguese had created an influx of chocolate in the European market, driving prices down and creating a mass market for its consumption. This process allowed chocolate to move from the royal courts and homes of elite nobles to the broader public as a luxury good with attached cultural and social prestige. Chocolate pots became a signifier of that cultural prestige. By the beginning of the eighteenth century chocolate, was consumed around the Atlantic.

France

The *chocolatiere* or chocolate pot was most likely invented by the French during the late part of the seventeenth or eighteenth century.²¹ Wherever its origin, the royal courts of France influenced the spread of chocolate pots to the rest of Europe. The design of the chocolate pot facilitated the stirring, frothing, and serving of the beverage. The very definition of the word *chocolatiere*, which first appeared in a French dictionary in 1680, stated that the pots purpose was as “a metal vase in which one keeps chocolate until one wishes to take it”.²² This practice maintained the traditional preparations of chocolate developed by the indigenous people from the New World.²³ The pot itself is a small metal container with a lid and a spout at a ninety-degree angle to its handle. The lid has a hole in the top for the wooden stirring stick called a *molinet*.

Within its French context, the *chocolatiere* became a fashionable expression of aristocratic life through the eighteenth century. The common medium for the chocolate pots in this setting was silver. For example, Marie Antoinette had a one hundred piece silver dining service made that showcased her *chocolatiere*.²⁴ Paintings of the period demonstrate the cultural prestige of chocolate. Commissioned portraits showcase aristocratic families around their *chocolatieres*. Jean-Baptiste Charpentier’s *La Tasse de Chocolate* or Boucher’s *Dejeuner* suggest the pleasures of life that chocolate can bring.²⁵ Evidence from a 1713 Basque inventory of Pau demonstrates a proliferation of lower base metal *chocolatiers* in the middle and lower social classes.²⁶ Bronze, copper, and tin chocolate pots in France were affordable alternatives to the silver

²¹ Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 160.

²² Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 159.

²³ Suzanne Perkins, “Is It A Chocolate Pot?” In *Chocolate: History, Culture, Heritage*, Louis Grivetti and Howard Shapiro, eds. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 158.

²⁴ Perkins, “Is It A Chocolate Pot?,” 169.

²⁵ Perkins, “Is It A Chocolate Pot?,” 167.

²⁶ Perkins, “Is It A Chocolate Pot?,” 160.

pots of the elite. This demonstrates a high demand in French culture for chocolatiers.

England

Garthorne made the earliest example of an English silver chocolate pot in 1685.²⁷ English silver smiths quickly started imitating the French design as the prestige associated with the chocolatier spread. The consumption of chocolate took on new forms in England. A key difference between French and English chocolate culture was the space in which chocolate was consumed. Unlike the French, who tended to use their chocolatiers within the home for private functions, or at times, at large parties and galas, the English consumption of chocolate most frequently took place in public establishments. The first chocolate houses were established in England in the 1650s.²⁸ These locales became the meeting places for men and quickly became associated with politics, literary circles, and debauchery. Base metals were the common mediums used for commercial chocolate pots in the chocolate houses.²⁹ As the prestige of consuming chocolate increased, so did the demand for chocolate related accoutrements. This led to the theft of luxury goods like chocolate pots. In the records of the *Old Bailey*, there are several proceedings related to these thefts. On December 5th, 1711 Charles Goodale was sentenced to death for breaking into a home and stealing a silver chocolate pot worth twelve pounds amongst other items.³⁰

Colonial America

Chocolate, and subsequently the chocolate pot, reached colonial America through Britain.³¹ As in Europe, chocolate was perceived to be a luxury good attached with cultural prestige; thus, increasing the demand for these items. The use of chocolate pots demonstrates the connection with the prestigious elite. In 1740 the *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertised the importation and sale of these chocolate pots. One Isaac Jones, a Philadelphia merchant listed that “he has the following European Goods, which he will dispose of very reasonable for ready

²⁷ Coe and Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 162.

²⁸ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate: A Global History*, 35.

²⁹ Louis E. Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro, *Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage*, Louis Evan Grivetti, eds. (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2009), 151.

³⁰ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 25 September 2012), December 1711, trial of Charles Goodale (t17111205-29).

³¹ Moss and Badenoch, *Chocolate: A Global History*, 30.

Money or short Credit” among those goods listed were chocolate pots.³² By 1742 the demand of colonial Philadelphia was great enough for craftsmen to go into business making chocolate pots. One advertisement for a brazier was for making and selling chocolate pots “and other sort of Copper work when spoke for, cheaper by Retail, than imported from Europe.”³³ This demonstrates a mass market for chocolate pots in America, as well as a cultural shift.

In an article by Amanda Lange titled “Chocolate Preparation and Serving Vessels in Early North America,” her research found that copper, brass, and tinned sheet iron chocolate pots appear more frequently in America than their silver counterparts.³⁴ For example, only eight silver chocolate pots survived from Boston during this period.³⁵ The low number of existing silver chocolate pots points to a relatively few number of them made. More affordable base metal constructions provided lower classes with alternatives to silver chocolate pots of the elites. Thus, the chocolate culture was changing from a prestigious item used only by the aristocratic elite to a common good.

Proliferation of chocolate pots through Europe and into colonial America demonstrates a consumer culture that attached prestige to chocolate-related accoutrements. The aristocratic elites of Europe embraced their gold and silver chocolatiers as a symbol of their power and regality, often depicted in portraits of the time. As affordable alternatives became available to the masses in colonial America, everyone could interact in the consumption of chocolate through their serving pots. This creates a divergence in cultural imperatives that can be seen in examples of surviving chocolate pots from Europe and colonial America. The genteel and simple base metal designs of American chocolate pots can serve as a statement of colonial American culture. Colonists did not want the decadence of an Old World aristocracy. A lack of highly ornate chocolatiers in colonial everyday life

³² The Pennsylvania Gazette, *Isaac Jones Intending for London This Spring, Desires All Pe*, in the Accessible Archives, <http://proxy.library.eiu.edu:2202/> (accessed March 10, 2012).

³³ The Pennsylvania Gazette, *By Peacock Bigger, Opposite the Presbyterian Meeting House*, in the Accessible Archives, <http://proxy.library.eiu.edu:2202/accessible/print?AADocList=1&AADocStyle=&AAStyleFile=&AABeanName=toc1&AANextPage=/printFullDocFromXML.jsp&AACheck=5.1.1.1> (accessed March 10, 2012).

³⁴ Amanda Lange, “Chocolate Preparation and Serving Vessels” In *Chocolate: History, Culture, Heritage*, Louis Grivetti and Howard Shapiro, eds. (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 134.

³⁵ Lange, “Chocolate Preparation and Serving Vessels,” 151.

and expressions i.e., paintings, can parallel the growing rejection of imperial and monarchical fetters.

Focusing on a commodity allows for a more in depth analysis of the interactions and connections established and maintained in the Atlantic World. By following chocolate from its production in the Americas to its consumption in Europe, a commodity chain is clearly established. Luxury items, like chocolate, created prestigious goods that participants in chocolate consumption illustrated through their chocolatiers. As discussed, the expression of consumption took on many forms and practices by various groups involved in a broader chocolate culture. While further research can advance this limited historiography, chocolate and its serving accoutrements demonstrate a diverse and dynamic relationship over vast territories and people.