

# Why chocolate matters to the Jewish community

Michael Leventhal February 13, 2022



*Before you take your next bite of some delicious chocolate, you may want to check out this book from [Green Bean Books](#). In [Babka, Boulou & Blintzes](#), British author Michael Leventhal explores the history of chocolate in Jewish food and culture. If you're a chocoholic or know one, this book of chocolate-*

*based recipes, or those with an interest in the diverse ways that chocolate is used around the world, this book is for you. Here, in this exclusive excerpt, we examine why Chocolate matters to the Jewish community.*

Chocolate matters. Every day, more than a billion people worldwide enjoy chocolate and every year, over three million tons of cocoa beans are harvested.

But did you know that Jewish traders have played a key role in the chocolate industry for more than 500 years? The Jewish community has a love of food and – despite chocolate having no set part in any festivals or rituals – Jews have been crucial in helping introduce chocolate to a great many countries around the world.

## Maya and Aztec

The Maya became the first to unlock the secrets of the cocoa bean more than 5,000 years ago. They dried and ground the beans, mixing them with water to create a hot, frothy chocolate drink. They even made pots with spouts and poured the liquid between them to create a cappuccino-like foam. After the Maya culture collapsed, the Aztecs followed. They believed that chocolate was a gift from the gods that was more valuable than gold. According to one report, the Aztec emperor Montezuma drank more than fifty cups of hot chocolate every day.

It wasn't until 1502 that Europeans were introduced to chocolate when Christopher Columbus made his fourth voyage to the Americas. Columbus received a gift of cocoa beans from the island of Guanaja off the coast of Honduras – but he mistakenly thought they were almonds or goat's droppings and had no idea how to use them. There are many historians who suggest

Christopher Columbus himself was Jewish and there is certainly good evidence that he had Jewish ancestry. So, arguably, this is the point at which Jewish involvement in chocolate history and trade begins.

It also seems likely that a few of Columbus's crew members were Jewish. The Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal spent years researching the history of Columbus's voyages and claimed in his book *Sails of Hope: The Secret Mission of Christopher Columbus* that as many as one-third of his 120-strong crew could have been Jewish. It is more likely, however, that only three of his crew were conversos – Jews pretending to have converted to Christianity to avoid persecution: the ship's surgeon, Maestro Bernal; Marco, a cook; and a Hebrew and Arabic interpreter named Luis de Torres.

Additionally, Columbus almost certainly received funding from two conversos named Louis de Santangel and Gabriel Sanchez (Gabriel's relative Rodrigo Sanchez may have travelled with Columbus). He also had financial support from a well-known rabbi named Don Isaac Abarbanel.

## **Spanish Conquistadores**

If Columbus failed to realize the potential of his cocoa beans, Europeans didn't have long to wait for their first hit of chocolate. In 1528, ten years after the bloody Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, some of the Aztecs treasured chocolate – nicknamed 'brown gold' – was taken back to Spain by the Spanish conquistador Don Hernán Cortés. By the 1580s, regular imports of cocoa beans had begun because by then the Spanish had mastered the technique of converting the pods into a thick, delicious drink.

It was now that Jewish traders in Spain started playing a key role in the creation and expansion of the chocolate market. At the

time they were blocked from numerous occupations as a result of widespread anti-Semitic prejudice: the chocolate business was something the Jews were able and permitted to do and so they embraced it, though trading rights were often withdrawn if they became too successful.

## **France and Bayonne**

Following the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, many Spanish and Portuguese Jews were forced to flee to new countries and a number took with them the skill of chocolate-making, something they subsequently came to rely on for their livelihood.

Take the southern French town of Bayonne, which is still known as the ‘chocolate capital of France’. Thanks to its riverside location, Bayonne became cocoa central after the arrival of Spanish Jews in the early 1600s; documents show that at least 60 Jewish converso families lived in the district of Saint Esprit. Their chocolate became increasingly popular but Jewish chocolate makers were forced to leave Bayonne each evening before sunset. They were not allowed to establish premises or live in the city and had to carry their heavy cocoa-grinding equipment to and from houses and shops.

As time went on, many professional French and Spanish Jewish bakers introduced chocolate fillings and started making chocolate cakes – the recipe for one of those cakes is included in this collection. Sadly, though, the Jews’ success turned to their disadvantage, provoking resentment and restrictions. The Bayonnais even fought to ban Jews from making chocolate – once they had learned the craft themselves.

A series of laws was passed in the 1720s, forbidding Jews to make chocolate in shops and warehouses in Bayonne. Records show that, twenty years later, a Jewish man was caught making the

drink in an apartment, and he gamely protested that the laws did not apply to apartments. In 1762 a guild of chocolate-makers was formed by Christian artisans as another attempt to block Jewish entrepreneurs from competing in the trade. By 1860, there were only two Jewish artisans left in Saint Esprit practising chocolate-making, but in Bayonne there were still 32 chocolate-makers – a very large number for a fairly small town.

Today, however, Bayonne is proud of its chocolate heritage and the city's tourist board and chocolate museums give full credit to the Jewish community. A trip, with plenty of tastings, is recommended.

As in France, Jews fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition seeded the magic of chocolate-making, and its possible fortunes, around other parts of Europe including Denmark, Holland, Portugal and England.

In Belgium, for example, the abbot of Baudelo in Ghent is believed to be the first person to take chocolate to the country in 1635 – but it was a Jewish immigrant named Emmanuel Soares de Rinero, who had settled in the province of Brabant, who was the first to be issued with a licence to manufacture chocolate.

## **British Coffee and Chocolate Houses**

The first British coffee house to be documented as serving hot chocolate also has a strong Jewish link. This was in 1650, in the city of Oxford – a year when Jews were being readmitted to England. According to a number of sources – including the diarist Samuel Pepys – The Angel was set up by a Lebanese Jewish entrepreneur named Jacob. His surname is not known and the date of his very first hot chocolate was not recorded. The Grand Caf on the city's High Street commemorates the site today. Jacob later moved his trade to London's Holborn area, though a Frenchman had already opened the capital's first

chocolate house in Bishopsgate in 1657, after which many chocolate houses quickly popped up.”

## **Expansion Worldwide**

As well as the Jewish community, other religious groups were heavily involved in the global chocolate trade. The Catholic Church encouraged the drinking of chocolate for sustenance on the numerous fasting days, while chocolate companies run by practising Quakers included Cadbury of Birmingham, Fry’s of Bristol and Rowntree’s of York. Richard Cadbury, the elder of the two famous Cadbury brothers, made two trips to Jerusalem in the late 1800s.

The Jewish involvement in the trade has been discussed in comprehensive detail by Rabbi Debbie Prinz in her book, *On The Chocolate Trail: A Delicious Adventure Connecting Jews, Religions, History, Travel, Rituals and Recipes to the Magic of Cacao*.

Here, I will simply set down a brief summary of the next stage in Jewish chocolate production worldwide. For that, we travel across the seas to the French Caribbean.

A Jew from Bayonne named Benjamin D’Acosta de Andrade arrived on the island of Martinique in 1654. D’Acosta de Andrade cultivated cacao trees and became the first person to open a cocoa-processing plant in this French territory. Other Jews soon followed his example and helped the chocolate trade develop and flourish over the next few decades.

By 1684, chocolate was Martinique’s most lucrative export but by now the Jews’ success had generated envy from competitors – the following year a law known as the Code Noir was published, calling for the expulsion of Jews from all

French islands. So, again, the Jews were sadly not rewarded but instead forced to flee to new homes.

D'Acosta de Andrade left for the Dutch haven of Curaçao which consequently developed a thriving chocolate industry of its own. Records suggest that at least 200 Jewish cocoa brokers were working in Curaçao in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Curaçao today, hot chocolate and panlevi sponge cookies are still served at a brit milah, or circumcision. Recipes for both are included in this collection.

## Americas

When it comes to chocolate's arrival in North America, we can thank the well-respected Sephardi entrepreneur Aaron Lopez. He was one of the wealthiest Spanish Jews to start a successful business in the seaside city of Newport, Rhode Island.

Lopez's parents were members of the converso community in Lisbon, Portugal. After he arrived in Rhode Island in October 1752 he quickly became one of the city's most important merchants. Lopez was involved in many trades – shoes, hats, handkerchiefs, candles, bottles, and more – and he became one of the key people responsible for bringing the chocolate business to America by importing cocoa and producing chocolate.

Other Jewish businessmen also played an important role in the chocolate trade. Celia D. Shapiro, co-author of *Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage*, suggests that Jews who settled in New York were not allowed to work in retail trades but the import business was something they were permitted to do. They had connections with Dutch colonies and cacao was a

profitable, viable commodity to import.

## Sachertorte

It was around 1850 that a pastry maker really turned the world of chocolate baking on its head, inventing something that is still popular today – the world-famous chocolate cake known as the Sachertorte.

In a detailed blog piece Nino Shaye Weiss explains that Franz Sacher was the pastry chef responsible and writes that he was one of a long line of Central European Jewish pastry professionals. Countless other websites include the assertion that Sacher was Jewish. The claim possibly first appeared in Gil Mark's Encyclopaedia of Jewish Food and has been endlessly repeated – but, in fact, although his daughter-in-law was Jewish, there is no hard evidence that Sacher himself was. Also, contrary to popular belief, the cake was not developed in 1832 and it was not created in Vienna, but in Pressburg (today's Slovak capital Bratislava).

One giveaway is that the 'conching' processes needed to make smooth-melting chocolate for the glossy topping of the cake were only available from the second half of the nineteenth century. Sacher himself insisted in an interview given on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday that he first made Sachertorte around 1850 in Pressburg where he worked for the nobility at the local casino. Nino Weiss's tempting version of the cake is included here.

## Chocolate Gelt

At the top of this introduction, I said that chocolate plays no set key role in any festivals or rituals. While this is true, many

families around the world purchase pouches of chocolate-wrapped coins as part of their Chanukah celebrations. It's become known as Chanukah chocolate gelt (money in Yiddish). The tradition is believed to have been started in America by the Loft company of New York in the 1920s (when Loft Inc. was perhaps the world's largest confectionery business). It was a development from the idea of minting coins to celebrate the Macabees' military victory, and also the more recent eighteenth-century tradition of giving religious teachers money as a token of gratitude.

## World War II

As the storm clouds of the Second World War gathered in Europe, the rise of the Third Reich prompted a Latvian Jewish chocolate maker, Eliyahu Fromenchenko, to emigrate to pre-state Israel in 1933. He took with him equipment from his former chocolate and sweet factory and founded the iconic Israeli company, Elite, with a factory in Ramat Gan. Elite later became the official supplier of chocolate to the Allied units stationed in Palestine during World War II. The Nazi rule also prompted an Austrian Jewish chocolatier named Stephen Klein to escape to New York in 1939. The following year he founded the successful chocolate company, Barton's Bonbonniere, which is now known as Barton's Candy.

During World War II itself, chocolate had an unexpected role to play with a new Jewish connection. Explosives disguised as expensive chocolate bars were designed by the Third Reich as part of a curious plot to kill Winston Churchill. The Germans planned to smuggle booby-trapped bars into the

Prime Minister's War Cabinet dining room. They intended to use secret agents based in Britain to place the elegantly wrapped 'Peter's Chocolate' bars in the dining room. A few seconds after the chocolate was removed from the packaging, the slab would detonate.

The attempt on Churchill's life was partly foiled by the Jewish scientist Lord Victor Rothschild, who was working for the security services. Rothschild asked an artist named Laurence Fish to draw up posters of the chocolate and warn the public to watch out for the bars.

## Chocolate and Wisdom

Some recent studies have claimed that chocolate helps improve the flow of blood to your brain as well as reducing anxiety levels. According to research published in the New England Journal of Medicine the countries where chocolate consumption is highest even have the most Nobel Prize recipients!

Anyone looking for further evidence of a link between chocolate and genius should look to the collection of New York's Leo Baeck Institute. It includes two porcelain and gold-leaf cups from the 1880s that were used for drinking hot chocolate by Albert Einstein and his sister Maya when they were children. The specially-commissioned cups have photos of the siblings on the side.

And, in one final link to chocolate, Einstein was working as a clerk in the patent office in Berne, Switzerland, when the makers of Toblerone submitted an application for a patent – but it is not known (and seems unlikely) that it was him who

approved their application.

## Conclusion

In modern times, the relationship between the chocolate trade and the Jewish community is no longer as strong as it once was, but it is a shame to think that the enterprising association that existed over hundreds of years is in danger of being forgotten. So, the next time you take a bite of a bar, or enjoy a sip of hot chocolate, give a thought to the 500-year journey of this marvellous 'brown gold'.