

Wise Woman and the Tree of the Gods: A Legend about Chocolate.

Over 1500 years ago in southern Mexico, a Wise Woman walked in all the wild places, studying plants and identifying those offering food that people could eat. For she knew that many plants giving food to birds and animals in the warm, wet forests are not safe for humans. This was the time of the Mayan people, and it was whispered in the villages that Wise Woman spoke to the plants. She was rumoured to embrace them, take a leaf, flower or seed and hold it in her hand for a time, then place it on her tongue or against her wrist. Only after a long period of communing with each plant would she speak about it, describing which parts could be eaten.

Beneath the shade of one tall forest were particularly fine trees, growing to the height of ten men. The wood proved to be surprisingly light and the leaves were long and glossy. Flowers grew on these trees almost all year round, transforming into egg shaped, yellow and red fruits, larger than a person's hand and filled with seeds. These trees outlived any human and bore flowers and fruits when very young. However, many people had examined the fruits and found them dry and tasteless, packed with seeds that were bitter and fit only for birds.

Wise Woman considered these trees for a long time. One day she gathered some leaves and fruits with their seeds and brought them to her own village. While the people shook their heads and muttered amongst themselves, she was seen to invoke the magic powers of earth, water, fire and air over both the leaves and shiny seeds. Again and again she repeated her mysterious ritual.

Only after many days did she reveal how these trees might nourish people. First, the large fruits must be picked and the seeds or beans taken out and left to dry. Next, she showed people how to cover the beans with the trees' own leaves, leaving them to ferment and become less bitter. Then they must roast the beans over a fire and crush them in order to remove the shell. The remaining seed kernel was to be pounded into a powder and mixed into boiling water, along with honey, chilli, musk and spices.

The people followed her guidance, finding the resulting drink so remarkable that they called the trees Cacahuauquachtl, meaning The Trees of the Gods. Today it is called the cacao tree.

Around 500 years later, the Toltecs and the Aztecs settled into Mayan lands and Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec king, had his people taught to cultivate cacao trees. The population also processed seeds from the cacao tree like the Mayans before

them. The hot drink they made was called Tchocoatl, leading to the word chocolate.

So precious were these beans we now call cocoa that the Aztecs used them as money. 10 beans would buy a plump rabbit. Cocoa is the base for most forms of chocolate enjoyed today.