

TASTE & TRAVEL

INTERNATIONAL

LAUNCH ISSUE SPRING 2011

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Belize
BIRTHPLACE OF

chocolate

CAD/US \$6.95

t&t

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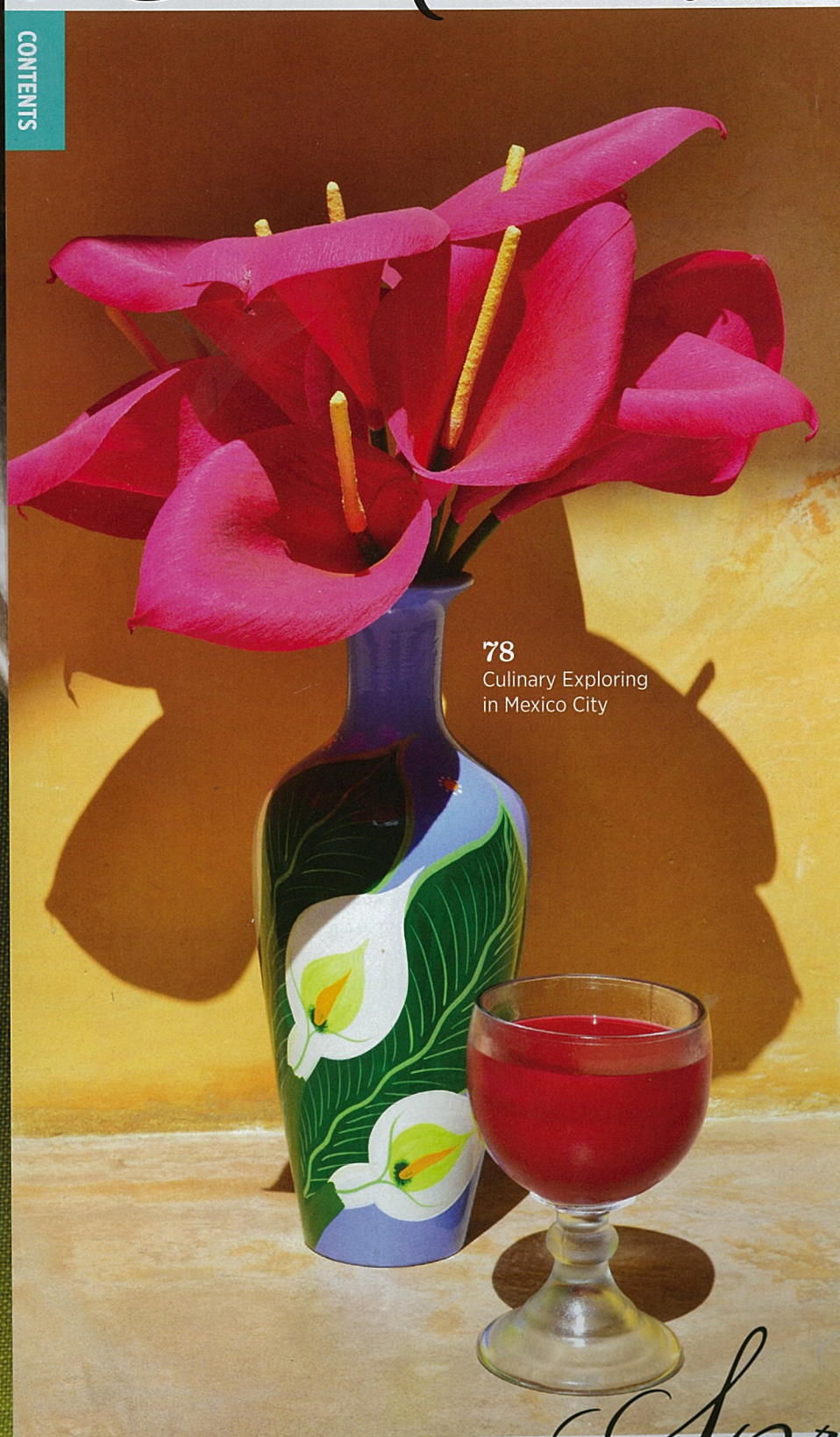
PLUS

MOZAMBIQUE VERMONT MEXICO CITY PARIS LONDON TORONTO BRUSSELS ARIZONA

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Spring 2011

A CULINARY CELEBRATION IN THE BIRTHPLACE OF

CACAO FEST

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DIANE PENWILL

The stars in the clear skies blink in sync with the tiny lights that trace the inner walls of the rooftop terrace of the University of Belize as the Wine & Chocolate evening, which kicks off the 4th Annual CacaoFest, begins. The CacaoFest, a celebration of chocolate-making and all things Belizean, is officially underway. A flutist plays traditional music. Tourists, expats and Belizeans from all over the country are streaming up the stairs to the sold-out event. Chocolate tasting tables arranged by »

Cocoa, Cacao or Kakaw?

THE TRADITION OF CHOCOLATE-making in Belize traces its origins back about 1,500 years to the Mayans. Toledo is an ancient centre of Mayan culture and has the largest concentration of Mayan villages in Belize. A number of important ruins are nearby, including Lubaantun, Nim Li Punit, and Uxbenka. It was the Maya who discovered how to transform cocoa beans into chocolate, and the word cocoa is derived from the Mayan word *kakaw*, pronounced "ka-ka-wa", written "cacao" in Belize today. Mayan kings drank chocolate as a sacred beverage and an aphrodisiac. They traded cacao beans as currency and even taxed the brown bean. Now, after over 1,500 years, during which the Mayan civilization collapsed, the ancestors of those Mayan cacao farmers are earning their livelihood from the crop. The farmers export their beans through the Toledo Cacao Growers Association (TCGA), founded in 1984 and based in Punta Gorda, a not-for-profit co-operative of over a thousand small farms. And chocolate is, of course, still a currency for cultural exchange. **t&t**

«Belize's artisanal chocolate-makers (Cotton Tree, Goss, Cyrila's and Kakaw), a selection of Belizean wines and a fragrant, culturally-inspired buffet based on a sampling of Creole, Maya and Garifuna dishes, await the crowd.

"This chocolate is made with allspice and wild vanilla," encourages the woman at Cyrila's, from the Mayan village of San Felipe. I almost inhale my truffle, which is dripping with rich Belizean cream. The smooth, organic chocolate tastes intense and ethereal. Chocolate cashew cups from Goss in Seine Bight must be tried with the cashew wine. The wine is produced not from the nut, but from the fermented juice of its fruit, called a cashew apple. It is musky, nutty, sweet, mild and low in alcohol.

Blackberry wine is made from very ripe fruit and can vary in sweetness. Cyrila's makes a cacao wine which tastes like sherry, with honey and chocolate notes. Belizeans can turn just about anything into wine (and also fruit brandy or rum) from local fruits, which include cocoa, blackberry, mango, pineapple, apple, grapefruit, starfruit, sea grapes, cashew, guava, craboo and also from pumpkin, rice, ginger and cassava and even from herbs, flowers and cider bark.»

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Buffet at the Wine & Chocolate evening; Aerial view of an inland river; Rainforest tree; Lush rainforest near Lubaantun; Coral House Inn; packaging Cotton Tree Chocolate. INSET: Green cacao pod on cacao tree.

Cook

& Cacao Balls

The starting point for Mayan cacao recipes, savoury and sweet

MOST MAYAN CACAO RECIPES involve the use of cacao balls, which can be purchased in the market for about \$2BZ (or \$1 CDN) for one ball. Cacao balls are made of pure, roasted cacao beans which are worked on a flat grinding stone similar to a mortar and pestle. Each ball is equivalent to 3–4 ounces of cocoa powder or baking chocolate.

The beans are worked until they are pliable. Then water is added so the balls can be formed. The cacao balls do not need refrigeration, although some women add black pepper as an additional preservative. Many Maya also like to grate or grind vanilla beans into the cacao for more flavor. The balls are grated for drinks and can also be used as a rich substitute for cocoa powder or baking chocolate squares in cooking.

Anna Kuk, who lives in Big Falls Village in the Toledo District, makes a traditional Mayan cacao drink by mixing a tablespoon of finely grated cacao beans or cacao ball with a cup of hot or cold water and sugar to taste. She might add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup raw masa (lime-treated cornmeal dough) or masa harina (the dried form of masa) to the drink, which thickens it and makes it more porridge like. The consistency of the drink is thin and gritty with cacao bits. Sometimes the drink is made as a bitter beverage without a sweetener and sometimes honey is added. The Maya often add cinnamon bark, vanilla bean, salt and/or chili peppers to the traditional drink and sometimes sprinkle finely ground roasted peanuts on top as a garnish.

Kuku U'kul

Kuku U'kul is the name of the traditional Mayan cacao drink served at the Toledo CacaoFest. The recipe is for 20 servings and starts with $\frac{1}{2}$ lb of fermented cacao beans, roasted evenly over low heat for 30–40 minutes, then cooled and shelled. The cacao nibs are then ground with $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp black pepper until the cacao turns into a buttery paste. A teaspoon of vanilla is added and the paste is left for 10–15 minutes to allow the flavours to develop. Alternatively, it can be refrigerated for up to 7 days, or frozen for up to 2 months. To make Kuku U'kul, 2 oz of the cacao paste is mixed into hot water, with sugar and milk to taste. It may be served hot, or chilled for "Iced Kuku." Bittersweet chocolate can be used as a substitute in recipes that are traditionally made with cacao paste. [t&t](#)



SCENES FROM THE CACAOFEST weekend and the Toledo area.



*We love the smell. We love the taste.
We love the glorious chemical,
whole-body, euphoric reaction...*

«“We love the smell. We love the taste. We love the glorious chemical, whole-body, euphoric reaction,” enthuse Jo and Chris Beaumont, from Kakaw Chocolate on Ambergris Caye, on their website. At the festival, Kakaw is serving liquid chocolate into which we dip wedges of mango, nutty pineapple and buttery papaya — a velvety organic fruit and chocolate fondue. We talk about tasting notes in chocolate, such as citrus, blackberries, caramel and cashew nuts. In Belizean chocolate these aren’t added ingredients, but flavors brought out during cacao’s long transformation from bean to bar. Apparently, there can be over 600 natural flavors hidden in a single piece of chocolate.

“We always know which farm our beans are from,” says Juli Puryear, who runs Cotton Tree Chocolate. Cacao beans only grow in the south, which gets the most rainfall and Cotton Tree sources all its beans from the farms and Mayan villages which surround Punta Gorda. Cotton Tree makes not just single-origin chocolate, from the beans of one region, but each batch starts with the organically-grown beans from a single day’s harvest and a single farmer. Chocolate made in Belize comes with a best-before date, a batch and bar number and each bar tastes slightly different.

The chefs of the region incorporate chocolate into traditional savoury dishes and we sample a few. I dip fresh shrimp into a Belizean mole, a traditionally Mexican sauce made with chocolate, chili peppers, onion, garlic, tomato, and cilantro and served with Creole rice and beans, made from red pinto beans and mixed with rice and coconut milk (“rice & beans” cooked together is a different dish to “beans & rice” which are served separately). I try the cracker-like cassava bread, a Garifuna tradition, which comes with hummus. Mayan corn tamales, with meat and cheese fillings, are served steamed and wrapped with a plantain leaf.

“It takes three days to make a single batch of chocolate,” Juli laughs, when we tour her factory the following day. “We call it The Very Slow Food Movement.” Conditions for chocolate-making aren’t perfect, as the temperature hovers around the 30-degree mark. Heat doesn’t deter chocolate-lovers. It’s high noon and a line-up is forming outside Cotton Tree. The cultural hodgepodge reflects the ethnic diversity of Belize — the festival crowd includes African-British Creoles, Spanish-Mayan Mestizos, African-Carib Garifuna, East Indians, a Mennonite farmer, a Chinese business owner, a British ex-pat and a few backpackers.

Juli, who runs Wilma Wonka’s Espresso Café & Cotton Tree Chocolate from a single-room building, with three employees, produces about 20,000 chocolate bars a year. Wilma Wonka’s self-titled»



Cook &

SERVES 4

Mayan Spicy Chocolate Chicken

Chicken rubbed with savoury spices, seared and then baked, and served with a rich Mayan chocolate and tomato sauce.

Chicken Breasts

4, skin on and bone in

Chicken Stock

½ cup

Almonds

chopped, toasted,
¼ cup

Salt and Pepper

to taste

Tomatoes

canned, crushed,
½ cup

Canned Chipotle Pepper, 1

Vegetable Oil

1 Tbs

Lime Juice

2 Tbs

Semi-Sweet Chocolate

1 oz, chopped

Seedless Raisins

1 Tbs

Garlic

1 clove, chopped

Cilantro Leaves

fresh, minced, 1 Tbs;
plus extra for garnish

Sweet Onion

diced, 2 Tbs

Tortilla Chips

crushed, ¼ cup;
plus extra for garnish

- 1 Preheat oven to 375°F.
- 2 Season chicken with salt and pepper and Mayan Spice Rub (for recipe, see below). Reserve 2 tsp of Rub for chocolate sauce.
- 3 Heat oil in a large skillet over medium high heat. Add chicken, skin side down, and brown for 3 minutes.
- 4 Transfer chicken to a baking sheet and bake for 20–25 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through.
- 5 In the bowl of a food processor, combine garlic, tomatoes, onion, almonds, raisins, chipotle peppers, chicken stock and tortilla chips.
- 6 Process until puréed and place into a medium saucepan over medium heat.
- 7 Add lime juice, chocolate, cilantro, and 2 tsp Mayan Spice Rub. Stir constantly for 5 minutes until chocolate has melted and sauce has reduced and thickened.
- 8 Season to taste with salt and pepper.
- 9 Place chicken breasts on a large serving platter and fully cover chicken with sauce.
- 10 Garnish with cilantro and the extra tortilla chips.

Mayan Spice Rub

Cumin ground, 2 tsp **Coriander** ground, 1 tsp **Cinnamon** ground, 1 tsp **Allspice** ground, 1 tsp **Cloves** ground, 1 tsp

- 1 Combine in a small mixing bowl and mix well.

*It takes three days to make a single batch of chocolate...
We call it The Very Slow Food Movement...*

Cook
&

SERVES 6

Mayan Hot Chocolate

Modern-day Maya still drink this ancient hot chocolate recipe, often called kaku. The Maya never mix the cacao bean paste with milk, but use hot water. They use bittersweet chocolate, with a pinch of chili pepper, which enhances the aroma of the chocolate. Using milk instead of water makes it a milder, more European-style drink.

Water

boiling, 2 cups

Red Chili Pepper

1, cut in half, seeds removed

Milk

whole or non-fat, 5 cups

Vanilla Bean

1, split lengthwise or 1 tsp vanilla extract

Pure Honey

2 Tbs (or raw sugar, to taste)

Bittersweet Chocolate

8 oz

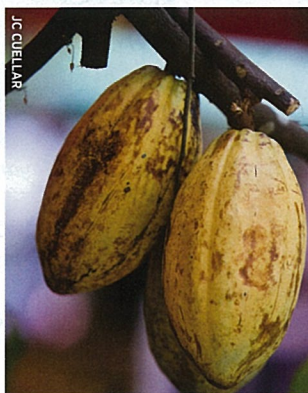
Peanuts

roasted, ground extra fine, 1 Tbs (optional)

Cinnamon Sticks

1-2


- 1 In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, add the chili pepper to boiling water.
- 2 Cook until the liquid is reduced to 1 cup.
- 3 Remove the chili pepper, strain the water and set aside.
- 4 Combine milk, vanilla bean and cinnamon sticks in a medium saucepan over medium heat and cook until bubbles appear around the edge.
- 5 Reduce the heat to low and drop in the chocolate pieces and add the honey, mixing well and whisking occasionally until the chocolate is melted.
- 6 Turn off the heat, removing the vanilla bean and cinnamon sticks.
- 7 Add chili-infused water, a little at a time, tasting to make sure the flavour isn't too strong. If chocolate is too thick, thin with a little more milk.
- 8 Whisk vigorously to create a light foam effect and sprinkle ground nuts on top.



RIPE CACAO pods.

to grind the beans into nibs. A hand-held blow dryer is used to remove the shells from the roasted beans. "The conch is the heart of the operation," says Juli. She originally fashioned a make-shift conch, which refines the chocolate and cuts the sharp taste of cacao, out of a big green bowl used for making Indian dahl. "The first time we tried it, the top came off and the walls were covered in chocolate." They now have a new conch, imported from the U.S. The end result of this mostly manual process is a thriving business which provides jobs to local workers, sustains cacao farmers and pays them fairly for their beans.

Of course, the process begins with the Mayan farmer who produces the cacao pod. On CacaoFest weekend, buses head to the organic cacao orchards at Cyrila Cho's farm. The tour includes a Mayan lunch, a spicy caldo (chicken soup) served with hand-made corn tortillas cooked over an open fire and kaku, a chocolate drink made from beans grown on the Cho farm. CacaoFest weekend finishes on a musical note, with a concert at Lubaantun ("Place of the Fallen Stones," in the foothills of the Maya mountains. The ancient stones, eroded by foot traffic of the centuries, provide an exotic, if uneven dance floor. Only the setting sun brings the festival to a close.

On the one-hour flight from Punta Gorda to Belize City en route home, we fly over lush, broccoli rainforest, the soft mounds of the Mayan mountains rising and falling. I hope to catch a final glimpse of a hidden temple, but all I see is a muddy snake of a river and the sun-drenched thread of the Southern Highway tracing the shoreline and veering inland. On the coast, white waves crash over briny mangrove. A distant cruise ship looks like an iceberg. Bright green islands pop up out of the marsh, foam cut-outs from a school project. I strain to get a view of the wispy threads of distant cayes. The setting sun hits the swampland and the plane is reflected in a dozen orange mirrors. I think how, with every visit, I learn a bit more about this tiny but diverse country. Like the tasting notes in its smooth, organic chocolate, Belize is a complex, harmonious blend of culture, food and language that always makes it worth one more visit. 

«"Chocolate Center of the Universe" produces "bean to bar" chocolate, with 100% Belizean ingredients. The sign for Wilma Wonka's is in line with the tradition of funky, hand-painted signs all over Belize, which give the towns the sleepy look of another era.

"Our methods are a little unconventional," Juli says, "but they work." I watch her assistant use a battery-operated power drill

Visit
&

The 2011 Toledo CacaoFest is from May 20-22.

www.toledochocolate.com

www.travelbelize.org

Accommodation

Coral House Inn
www.coralhouseinn.com

Cotton Tree Lodge
www.cottontreelodge.com


Blue Belize Guest House
www.bluebelize.com

Seafront Inn
www.seafrontinn.com

Hickatee Cottages
www.hickatee.com

The Garifuna and Cassava Bread-making

GRATING AND SIFTING
cassava in preparation for
making cassava bread.

CASSAVA BREAD-MAKING is a Garifuna culinary tradition and the rituals of making cassava bread connect the Garifuna to their ancestors. The Garifuna are descendants of native Carib and Arawak peoples from Central America who intermixed with African slaves. Cassava (*ereba*) is a vegetable whose gnarled root comes from a shrub and it is a staple, the potato of Garifuna cooking. The unearthed root only lasts 48 hours, but the bread keeps for several years. Cassava bread is labour-intensive. The skin is peeled off the root using a sharp knife. The root is pulverized using a wooden grating board (*egi*). The cassava is then stuffed into a long, woven basket (*ruguma*), which is hung from a tree overnight to strain the cassava and to ensure all the juice is extracted, as the juice contains a naturally-occurring cyanide, which is poisonous. Once dried, the cassava is sieved through flat, rounded baskets (*hibise*), to form a fine flour. The flour is spread over a large, hot iron griddle (*comal*), to toast. The bread is kept flat with a wooden tool (*garagu*). The finished bread is crisp and cracker-like. 



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