

Just how Jewish is chocolate?

Michael Leventhal, who has just published a book with Chai Cancer Care, gives us a brief history of a relationship that spans four continents

Every day, more than a billion people worldwide enjoy chocolate and, every year, more than three million tons of cocoa beans are harvested. But did you know that Jewish traders have had a 500-year-long relationship with chocolate?

The Jewish community has been involved in the global chocolate trade since before it first arrived in Europe and Jewish traders helped introduce chocolate to countries around the world.

Jews can't take any credit for discovering the secrets of the cocoa pod: the Olmecs were the first civilisation to use cocoa beans more than 5,000 years ago. They were followed by the Maya, who worked out to dry and ground the beans, mix them with water and create a hot, chocolate drink. They poured the drink between pots to create a cappuccino-like foam. After the Maya culture collapsed, the Aztecs came next, who believed that cocoa was a gift from the gods.

It wasn't until 1502 that Europeans and the Jewish community were first introduced to chocolate when Christopher Columbus made his fourth voyage to the Americas. Columbus captured a cargo of cocoa beans but mistakenly thought they were almonds or goat droppings!

The Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal claimed in his book *Sails of Hope* that Columbus and as many as one-third of his crew could have been Jewish. Plenty of historians provide good evidence that Columbus had Jewish ancestry. At least three of his crew were

certainly conversos – Jews pretending to have converted to Christianity to avoid persecution. There was a cook named Marco; a Hebrew and Arabic interpreter named Luis de Torres and, of course, a Jewish doctor; the ship's surgeon, Maestro Bernal.

If Columbus failed to realise the potential of his cocoa beans, Europeans didn't have long to wait for their first chocolate hit.

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.

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 antisemitic prejudice: the chocolate business was something the Jews were able and permitted to do and they embraced it.

Following the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, Spanish and Portuguese Jews were forced to flee to new countries. Some took the skills of chocolate-making with them.

Take the southern French town of Bayonne, still known as the chocolate capital of France. Thanks to its riverside location, Bayonne became cocoa central after the arrival of



The entrance to the Emanuel synagogue in Curaçao; at least 200 Jewish cocoa brokers were working in the Dutch haven in the 17th and 18th centuries; and the Elite Chocolate Factory in Ramat Gan, Israel, founded by Eiyahu Fromenchenko

Spanish Jews; documents show that at least 60 Jewish converso families lived in the district of Saint Esprit in the early 1600s.

Chocolate became increasingly popular but Jewish chocolate makers were forced to leave Bayonne each evening before sunset. They were not allowed to live in the city and had to carry their heavy cocoa-grinding equipment to and from houses and shops.

The Jews' success turned to their disadvantage. Once they had learned the craft themselves, the Bayonnais fought to ban Jews from making chocolate. 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.

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.

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 Inn was set up by a Lebanese Jewish entrepreneur named Jacob. His surname and the date of his first hot chocolate were not recorded. The Grand Café on the city's High Street commemorates the site today.

Jewish chocolatiers expanded production to the French Caribbean. A Jew from Bayonne named Benjamin D'Acosta de Andrade arrived on the island of Martinique in 1654. He cultivated cacao trees and became the first person to open a cocoa-processing plant in this territory. Other Jews soon followed his example and, by 1684, chocolate was Martinique's most lucrative export but the following year the Code Noir was published, calling for the expulsion

of Jews from all French islands. So, again, the Jews were 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 17th and 18th centuries. In Curaçao today, hot chocolate and panlevi sponge cookies are still served at a brit milah.

When it comes to chocolate's arrival in North America, we can thank the 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. His 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 became one of the key people responsible for bringing the chocolate business to America by importing cocoa.

Other Jewish businessmen also played an important role in the chocolate trade. The historian Celia D Shapiro suggested that Jews who settled in New York were not allowed to work in retail trades but were allowed to work in import businesses. They had connections with Dutch colonies and cacao was a profitable import commodity.

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



Photo: Marc Gerstein

Judi Rose's Jewelled Chocolate and Pomegranate Discs, from *Babka, Boulou & Blintzes*

of chocolate to the Allied units stationed in Palestine during the Second World War:

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 company, Barton's Bonbonniere, now known as Barton's Candy.

To conclude, in modern times, the relationship between the chocolate trade and the Jewish community is no longer as strong as it once was, but it would be a shame if the enterprising association that existed over hundreds of years were forgotten. The next time you take a bite of a rugelach at a Kiddush give a thought to the 500-year Jewish journey of this marvellous treat.

Michael Leventhal (michael@greenhillbooks.com) is publisher of Green Bean Books and author of the children's book The Chocolate King. His fundraising collection of Jewish chocolate recipes, Babka, Boulou & Blintzes, is available from Amazon or from Chai at www.chaicancercare.org/chocolate