

GLOSSARY

Cacao (Not to be confused with “Coca” below). Refers to both the tree and seeds from which chocolate is derived. In the theobromine family, the tree is related to coffee. Both our words cacao and chocolate derive from the Nahuatl (lengua franca of the Aztec empire) word or its cognates “cacahuatl” which literally means cacao water, since the bean was mostly used to produce a beverage, primarily for elite Aztecs (which they imbibed along with smoking tobacco), considered medicinally to reduce fatigue and encourage vigor. The elite use was indicative of the value of the seeds as currency—used as currency in Mexico periodically even as late as the 19th century.

Chinchona. Also cinchona, quina (from the native Quechua), known as Peruvian bark from a small tree native to the Andes in South America. The tree yields quinine and related drugs used traditionally and now to treat fevers—hence the English name the fever tree and one of the best brands of tonic water. Traditionally in the Andes the bark was brewed as a tea to treat fevers. The Spanish recognized it as an important addition to its pharmacopeia (that was developed as an official list of drugs beginning with the work of royal physician Francisco Hernandez in the 16th century). The Spanish name for the tree and the bark, chinchona, came from the Countess of Chinchon, who in the 16th century reportedly fell ill in Peru with a fever, was cured by an infusion of the bark from this native tree, and who then promoted it as a cure using her aristocratic influence. Ironically, the quinine derived from chinchona bark was the most effective treatment against the curse of malaria, a disease introduced by mosquitos from the Old World to the New.

Coca (Not to be confused with coco or cacao as above), or cuca from the native Aymara language. A Bush cultivated in the warmer areas of the Andean region of South America. Native peoples of the high Andes depended on coca, a plant that has several potent stimulants, to reduce fatigue and hunger and help breathe and function in the high altitudes of the Andes Mountains. Also used for pain relief, and almost used as a cure all. Natives chew the leaves or brew a tea from them. It constituted one of the four major crops of native Andean peoples for millennia along with potatoes, maize, and quinoa. It was so important to Andean people for their survival, it was used as a sacrifice to their gods. The drug cocaine is refined from coca leaves. Like cacao beans, the leaves were used as currency.

Cochineal. A small red insect or worm that feeds on cacti native to Middle America. Natives crushed the insect and used it as a textile dye. After conquest, the Spanish exported the dye to color textiles in Europe’s textile industry. Also had medicinal uses.

Matico. Plant from the pepper family native to South America. A poultice was made from the leaves to treat skin conditions. William Ruschenberger is credited with introducing it to the “materia medica” of the United States.

Nohpalli, or nopal. A family of cacti used for both food and medicine.

Teonochtli. Cacti used for tooth pain: its root is ground and burned with other substances and used on a cloth or cotton by putting on painful tooth in the cheek next to it.

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