Arts & Humanities

Cocoa Power

By
Phoebe Magee
|
Spring 2014

To drink a chocolaty mocha is “to gulp down the entire history of the New World,” the essayist Sarah Vowell observed. “The more history I learn,” she wrote, “the more the world fills up with stories.”

On the Wednesday after Valentine’s Day, when the Duane Reades of upper Broadway were offering their heart-shaped boxes half-price and pinning their hopes on chocolate bunnies, Domna Stanton ’69GSAS, a distinguished professor of French at the CUNY Graduate Center, gave a rich and bittersweet lesson in chocolate history at Columbia’s Maison Française.

Stanton presented “Enslaved to Chocolate: Culture, Commerce, and Gender in Seventeenth-Century France” to a full gallery of students and faculty. Apparently, research in the field of chocolate draws a crowd. Stanton began with some ancient gossip: that Marie-Thérèse, Louis XIV’s Spanish-born wife and the queen of France, liked to drink chocolate when the king was not around. Her predecessor, Anne of Austria, who arrived in 1615 as the fourteen-year-old Spanish infanta, had likely brought the first chocolate to France as a present for her fiancé, Louis XIII. By the time Marie-Thérèse came around, chocolate had already been linked to the suspect foreignness of the Spanish queens in France. But despite this nationalist suspicion, chocolate also benefited from its association with the ruling class, and soon the hottest invitation in France was to drink chocolate with the queen.

The child bride of Louis XIII was not the only one to bring chocolate into France. Iberian Jewish refugees brought chocolate along with them when they fled to Bayonne; Jesuits of New Spain exported it from the American colonies; and Amerindians (Stanton’s word) introduced the earliest known chocolate to the conquistadors. This is not to mention the slaves. Stanton recounted that, once

chocolate became popular in France, its trade was built on the slave labor of Africans. In keeping with the new globalization, French merchants traveled first to Africa, then with their human cargo to the French Antilles, where slaves worked plantations of cacao, sugar, and other valued crops. A ship filled with chocolate completed the triangle.

In the century of its introduction into France (its Spanish introduction came earlier), chocolate was a controversial luxury. The French spilled a great deal of ink recording its trade, extolling its medicinal virtues, and railing against its dangers. Chocolate had a whiff of black magic, and could be specifically linked with Amerindian women who were “great mistresses of sorcery.” Extending in part from its association with foreign queens, chocolate in seventeenth-century French writings is “gendered” feminine, said Stanton (though *le chocolat* is masculine). According to texts from the Medical Faculty of Paris, chocolate “excites the fervor of Venus,” and once accounted for seven children born to an infertile woman. And the compulsive letter writer Madame de Sévigné sent a cautionary epistle to her daughter saying that a pregnant woman drank too much chocolate and gave birth to a baby “black like the devil.”

But while the French sometimes seemed eager to distance themselves from chocolate’s exotic powers, they also took steps to claim it as their own. The treatises that Stanton had analyzed erased Indian recipes for chocolate that included ingredients like chili and maize. They “sacrilized” European additions to chocolate, like sugar and vanilla, and insisted it be served hot rather than cold. They severed ties to chocolate’s indigenous origins and denied those enslaved by it, addressing only those enslaved *to* it.

Stanton concluded her talk with a sobering contemporary fact. “Slave labor still exists,” she said, “in some cocoa plantations in West Africa, particularly in the Ivory Coast and Ghana, a fact that we deny or ignore.”

Given chocolate’s history, there are some things we simply cannot afford to swallow as we gulp down the history of the New World.

Read more from ***Phoebe Magee***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
*Read more from **Phoebe Magee***