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Cacao: The Cream of the Superfoods Crop

While you're tucking in to your favourite chocolate treat, think about this - chocolate is, in essence, a nut. Just like an almond in fact, and contains a stack of super-doooper properties that keep your body ticking over nicely just as it should. But before you get too excited, the mass-produced chocolate tempting you at the supermarket checkout is by no means the same thing as the fabulous foodstuff that is the cacao bean... sorry!

Whereas most people are aware of the health benefits of good quality dark chocolate, with its antioxidants, polyphenols, protein and host of vitamins and minerals like zinc, calcium, chromium, iron, potassium and magnesium; the true hero is cacao.

All chocolate products originally derive from the cacao bean, which comes from the Amazonian cacao tree. This unusual variation of standard fruit or nut trees forms football-sized pods in various colours on its trunk, inside which grows the precious cacao seed. This raw, unprocessed seed is the most basic form of chocolate, and contains a host of naturally-occurring vitamins, minerals and chemicals that make it a veritable superfood that's a far cry from the majority of chocolate products we are bombarded with in stores today.

Cacao is derived from theobroma cacao beans, which literally translates as 'food of the Gods,' and that's not an exaggeration - these little beauties contain over 300 cracking compounds, including protein, fat, carbohydrates, fibre, iron, zinc, copper, calcium, beta-carotene, amino acids, omega 3, essential fatty acids, potassium and magnesium, one of the best sources of stress relief.... phew!

Another cheery chemical found in cacao is the lipid anandamide, also known as 'chocolate amphetamine'. This causes changes in blood pressure and blood-sugar levels, leading to feelings of excitement and alertness, and is naturally present in our bodies when we're feeling great. Legend has it that the Mexican Mayan kings drank up to 30 pure chocolate drinks each day to maintain their sprightliness, and thought so highly of the bean that it was even used as currency!

Yet with the 1800s came the advent of machinery to crush cacao beans and, finally, the highly-processed product loved across the world, milk chocolate. Making chocolate as we know it is a complicated business, beginning with the roasting of the cacao beans to kill bacteria, remove bitterness and develop flavour. But this heat actually changes the bean's chemistry and dramatically reduces the product's antioxidant qualities. If alkaline chemicals or milk products are used, as is the case in much mass-produced chocolate, the chemistry is altered even further. Many of dark chocolate's health benefits remain, in fact, because there is no milk added during its creation, allowing more natural antioxidants to remain.

The grinding process is then undertaken by a machine called a melangeur, which has large rollers to mash the cacao into a paste. This then goes into a press which splits it into powder and butter, before sugar, an emulsifier like lecithin and other flavourings are added.

The next process is the mysterious process of conching, which turns the mixture into a smooth liquid that can be easily poured into moulds. This involves constantly grinding the mixture to evenly distribute the cocoa butter within the chocolate mass, making it smoother. The friction created polishes the cocoa particles and makes them smoother, whereas the rotation introduces air into the mass, removing bitter acids and compounds. Tempering is the next step, which makes chocolate shiny and breakable, and involves getting the crystals of cocoa butter to the perfect size.

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Compare this lengthy process to the simplicity of the raw product itself and it's pretty clear why it's best to stick to the natural stuff. Although cacao is one of the most powerful superfoods around, the processing steps between picking the beans and the chocolate they create transforms the ingredient into something with very few health benefits.

Just some of the nasties found in milk chocolate include Polyglycerol Polyricinoleate, an artificial emulsifier which helps manufacturers use a smaller amount of cocoa butter whilst creating the same texture, artificial flavours, corn syrup and partially hydrogenated oil, which contains trans fats. Chocolate's biggest villain, however, is sugar, which is often the main ingredient in cheap chocolate bars. In fact, such products can have a cacao content as shockingly low as 4 to 10 per cent, and can barely be classed as chocolate at all!

Our conclusion? Raw chocolate is many, many times more unique and powerful nutrients than highly processed chocolate, and if you're a sucker for a sneaky square of choccy, consider small amounts of raw cacao as a better option or a raw chocolate bar such as Loving Earth. But don't overdo it - cacao is a powerful substance with ingredients that can affect the entire nervous system, and whereas the correct amount can do much to boost the body, too much can do the opposite. The equivalent of 40g of pure raw cacao at the most is both beneficial to your bod and a tasty treat.

Other ways to incorporate this wonderstuff into your regular diet include adding it to smoothies and shakes for a quick boost, using it to create delicious dessert and raw cacao treats. Simply arm yourself with some cacao and prepare to reap the benefits!

.by Anand Wells, Live Food Education

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