

SUN *Monthly*



**Chocolate:
From the
Sacred to
the Delicious**

24

**A Sufi Mystic's
Insights
on Spiritual
Activism**

40

**Following
the Amish
Way to
Peace**

12

**Local Teens
Taking Action
to Create
Change**

20

**Santa Fe Joins
"Cool Cities"
to Reduce
Global Warming**

44

Bittersweet Symphony

RESURRECTING THE ANCIENT SACRED PRACTICES OF CHOCOLATE

by Marlon Heimerl



Awash in chocolate, Kakawa owners Kathleen Potter and Mark Scisenti.

Photo by James Black © 2006

Worshipped for 40 days as the god Quetzalcoatl in an annual ceremony, a captive slave, bedecked in jewels and ceremonial garments, is paraded through the streets of an Aztec city. On the eve of the 40th day of this ancient Mesoamerican ritual, the hapless slave is informed he will be executed after he performs a mandatory dance in the honor of the gods. If the slave becomes fearful or refuses to dance, he is fed a foaming elixir of blood mixed with chocolate called *itzpacaatl*. Following the consumption of this mixture, overwhelmed and enchanted by the plethora of chemicals inherent in the chocolate, the slave's fears turn to euphoria as he willingly surrenders himself to death, according to Sophie and Michael Coe in *The True History of Chocolate*.

This is but one of many bizarre and interesting rituals in which chocolate served as a ceremonial stimulant in the cultures of early Central America and southern Mexico. In its diverse history, "chocolate was considered to be the blood of the earth," writes Mark J. Scisenti, the owner of Santa Fe's Kakawa Chocolate House and a devout self-taught chocolate historian. "Strong associations between chocolate and human blood were common among the Mayans and Aztecs. Humans and the Earth were thus related in a sacred manner," he continues on his website, www.kakawachocolates.com.

An advocate of forgotten practices, Scisenti has re-created a profusion of ancient recipes and ceremonies, assuming the role of composer in the bittersweet symphony of chocolate history in New Mexico. A Santa Fe native raised by two archaeologists specializing in Southwestern indigenous history, he learned early on to revere the wisdom and insights of ancient cultures. Coming from a "media-free home," as he calls it, Scisenti believes that a childhood devoid of TV, magazines, newspapers, radio, junk food and sugar honed his interests in reading books, doing research and exploring nature. These strengths eventually fueled his ambitions as a self-taught chocolate historian, baker and "alchemist," delivering numerous scholarly lectures and gaining respect in the professional and scholarly world.

Before conceptualizing Kakawa Chocolate House, Scisenti attended Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, with a concentration in environmental studies, environmental politics, ecology and biodiversity. Troubled by the state of the environment, he then began to enthusiastically explore a wide range of "healing modalities" after college. "I did everything from fire walking to Lakota sweat lodges," proclaims Scisenti, recounting the process of finding his path.

In the midst of this period of discovery, as luck would have it, the book *The True History of Chocolate*, given to him by his life partner, Kathleen Potter, impassioned Scisenti and inspired him to experiment with chocolate. Learning by what he calls "the seat of his pants" ever since, with his career unfolding and the horizon broadening, his re-creations of ancient recipes have truly guided him to his current occupation.

At the request of prospective customers, Scisenti opened Kakawa Chocolate House on September 15, 2005, on Ninita Street in Santa Fe. Finding great inspiration in *The True History of Chocolate* and discovering a vast array of delicious recipes in a variety of other sources, he now produces over 10 different exotically flavored chocolate elixirs dating from 1000 B.C. to the mid-20th century A.D. Boasting a mouth-watering assortment of over 50 different chocolate truffles and a variety of other sweets as well, Kakawa

BITTERSWEET . . .

into a place of deeper unity with the planet. Suggesting that drinking large volumes of the substance puts one into a controlled trance, he believes that chocolate enhances meditation and provides a pathway for journeying into oneself and the world.

With an enchantingly complex chemical makeup, chocolate, referred to as a "chemical kaleidoscope" by Sophie and Michael Coe, provides the chemicals necessary to initiate the connection of which Sciscenti speaks. With a composition of between 300 and 1,200 naturally occurring chemicals, according to Sciscenti, chocolate can act as an antidepressant and an antioxidant, and has even been rumored to act as an aphrodisiac. In fact, phenylethylamine, or PEA, is a chemical present in chocolate that can trigger antidepressants in the brain similar to those released when one falls in love.

Despite all of these benefits, however, Sciscenti expresses caution. "You have to kind of take [the professed health effects of chocolate] with a grain of salt," he admits. "There are a lot of antioxidants and health benefits [inherent in] a whole lot of other foods. Chocolate is just a part of the puzzle." To a degree, however, as every true chocolate lover knows, the love chemicals, endorphins and antioxidants present in dark chocolates can stimulate momentary forms of euphoria and bliss for the consumer. Thus, Sciscenti uses his bittersweet

Sciscenti's profound passion for chocolate is rivaled only by his commitment to the preservation of the rainforest, the birthplace of cacao.

chocolate potions to bring people into an altered state, practicing ceremonies that are far more peaceful and safe than those endured by the unfortunate slaves of ancient Aztec civilizations.

Modifying the ritual of chocolate baptisms native to Mayan culture cited by Sophie and Michael Coe, Sciscenti uses the anointing process to return people from a state of meditation. In the Mesoamerican version of the ritual, an extravagantly dressed priest anointed

boys and girls on their foreheads and faces, as well as in between their fingers and toes, with a mix of liquid chocolate, crushed flowers and pure water from tree hollows. This ritual was meant to purify and welcome those anointed into the world of adulthood.

Another form of ritual that Sciscenti performs is a marriage ceremony. Coming from an ancient pagan principle of cherishing one's spouse — similar to feeding one another cake at a wedding — in this ritual, husband and wife can feed each other chocolate elixir in a loving display of nourishment. "You nurture the other," says Sciscenti, "and when you physically feed the other person, you're not just feeding them food, you're feeding them a part of yourself."

Despite all these sweet components, however, every yin has its yang, and chocolate also has its "dark" side. Sciscenti laments that without a regulated market, cacao farmers only see a small fraction of the proceeds from production, as faceless conglomerates claim the majority of earnings, inevitably leading to virtual slave labor in many Third World countries. To compound this complex and unjust situation, Sciscenti adds, the tree *Theobroma cacao* — which grows exclusively in the lower elevations of the rainforest 20 degrees north and south of the equator — has itself suffered much misfortune due to poor harvesting practices, lack of biodiversity and low levels of survivability.

Today, Africa is the leading producer of cacao crops, only aggravating these problems.

As is usually the case when crops are transferred from one part of the world to another, in Africa the major consideration was short-term financial gain rather than the long-term health of the environment during the introduction of this foreign species. As Sciscenti reveals, with only a few varieties of beans transplanted to Africa, the majority coming from the *Forastero* tree — the largest-yielding but poorest-tasting variety — a great loss in genetic diversity and biodiversity has resulted. Simply stated, if two plants have the same genetic makeup, they will both be killed by the same sickness, leaving cacao strikingly susceptible to disease and crop failure. In recent years, 40 percent of the world's cacao crop has been lost to disease, only exacerbating financial problems in the Third World.

Making matters even worse, Sciscenti discloses, plantations of sun-grown cacao plants are rapidly replacing the natural shade-grown plantations to which cacao trees are accustomed. Sun-grown cacao plantations are multiplying because they yield more crops at a faster rate, even though flavor is sacrificed and vulnerability to sickness is increased. Furthermore, precious rainforest is being destroyed to produce the clear-cut fields of the sun-grown cacao crops — and all of this for a crop that prefers the shade, richness of soil and pollinators of the rainforest itself.

With so many problems spinning out of control, Sciscenti looks for solutions. Hoping to someday own a cacao plantation in the birth-

Chocolate can act as an antidepressant and an antioxidant, and has even been rumored to act as an aphrodisiac.

place of chocolate, he dreams of setting an example for the future of cacao growth. "Rainforests are the lungs of the planet," he sighs. "There is an incredible wealth of healing plants in the rainforest, and we probably don't know about 95 percent of them." Convinced that chocolate production and the rainforest can coexist, Sciscenti holds the belief that quality rather than quantity is the solution and that the rainforest does not have to be destroyed at the expense of our collective sweet tooth. With the

goal to someday give life to cacao in its natural habitat beneath the spindly, leafy giants in the shade and humidity of the rainforest, he insists that he can demonstrate the sustainable, diverse and healthy growth of *Theobroma cacao*. "Small amounts of good-quality beans will blow away any bean that's out there," Sciscenti announces confidently, looking to the future.

The story of chocolate is indeed a "bittersweet symphony," played and interpreted with great variation, and orchestrated in different times and places. With a multitude of historical components producing one complex song — bitter notes of slavery, sacrificial killings, deforestation and economic injustice interlaced with sweet notes of spirituality, earthiness, positive health benefits and pleasurable delight — chocolate is a complicated substance. Whether the "food of the gods," a "chemical kaleidoscope," a means for connecting to the planet in deep meditation, or just a tasty treat, chocolate has quite a rich history. From the rainforest to the Rockies, as a devoted and passionate conductor and interpreter of this chocolate symphony, Mark J. Sciscenti, an alchemist and modern pioneer of cacao preparation, respects and utilizes the "blood of the Earth" in forgotten and sacred ways at Kakawa Chocolate House in Santa Fe.

“Bittersweet Symphony” (Original Word Version)
by Marlon Heimerl

Worshipped for forty days as the god Quetzalcoatl in an annual ceremony, a captive slave is paraded through the streets of an Aztec city, bedecked in jewels and ceremonial garments. As described by Sophie and Michael Coe in *The True History of Chocolate*, on the eve of the fortieth day of this ancient Mesoamerican ritual, the hapless slave is informed he is to be executed following the performance of a dance in honor of the gods. If the slave becomes fearful or refuses to dance, he is fed a foaming elixir of blood mixed with chocolate called *itzpacalatl*. Overwhelmed by the chemicals in the chocolate, the slave’s fears turn to euphoria as he willingly surrenders himself to death, “blazing with spirit and courage,” according to Juan de Torquemada, a 17th century Spanish historian cited by Sophie and Michael Coe.

This is but one of many rituals in which chocolate served as a ceremonial stimulant in the cultures of early Central America and Southern Mexico. In its bittersweet history, “chocolate was considered to be the blood of the earth,” writes Mark J. Sciscenti, the owner of Santa Fe’s Kakawa Chocolate House and a devout self-taught chocolate historian. “Strong associations between chocolate and human blood were common among the Mayans and Aztecs. Humans and the Earth were thus related in a sacred manner,” he explains on his website (www.Kakawachocolates.com).

A Santa Fe native raised by two archaeologists specializing in Southwestern Indigenous history, Mark J. Sciscenti grew up traveling the region with his parents, learning early on to revere the wisdom and insights of ancient cultures. Coming from a “media free home”, as he calls it, Sciscenti believes that a childhood devoid of TV, magazines, newspapers, radio, junk food, and sugar honed his interests in reading books, doing research, and exploring nature. These strengths eventually fueled his ambitions as a self-taught chocolate historian, baker, and “alchemist”. Today, Sciscenti’s meticulous re-creations are gaining respect in the scholarly world. He has had the honor of delivering numerous professional lectures, including one at the Columbia University Botanical Conference and another at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology’s 23rd Annual Mayan Weekend.

Before founding Kakawa Chocolate House, Sciscenti attended Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, concentrating in environmental studies, environmental politics, ecology, and biodiversity. Troubled by the state of the environment, Sciscenti began to enthusiastically explore a wide range of “healing modalities.” “I did everything from fire walking to Lakota sweat lodges,” proclaims Sciscenti, recounting the process of finding his path. As luck would have it, one birthday in the midst of this period of discovery, Sciscenti’s life partner, Kathleen Potter, presented him with a copy of *The True History of Chocolate*, giving life to his passion. Learning by what Sciscenti calls “the seat of his pants,” recreating ancient recipes quickly became his future.

After years of exploring and pursuing this passion, Sciscenti opened Kakawa Chocolate House on September 15th, 2005, on Ninita St. in Santa Fe. Finding great inspiration in *The True History of Chocolate*, and discovering a vast array of delicious recipes in other sources, Sciscenti now produces ancient chocolate elixirs dating from 1000 BC to the mid 20th century. These, along with over 50 different exotically flavored truffles and a variety of other sweets, make Kakawa Chocolate House a specialty chocolate shop of unparalleled originality and abundance.

Sciscenti’s passion for chocolate is rivaled only by his commitment to the preservation of the rainforest, the birthplace of cacao. In fact, all chocolate lovers are invited to join him this winter, on a ten day tour to Southern Mexico beginning on February 19, in conjunction with the Maya Exploration Center. On this journey, Sciscenti plans to conduct further research on cacao and early Mesoamerican culture. The itinerary includes a tour of ancient sites of the Olmec civilization, the first to domesticate the cacao tree. There will be exploration of Mayan ruins, cacao ceremonies performed by Sciscenti, visits to cacao and vanilla plantations, chocolate making, and a boat ride up the Usumacinta River to the remote ruins of Yaxchilan.

To enhance the rainforest experience, Sciscenti will be working with Christopher Powell and Alonso Mendez. Powell, an archaeologist specializing in astronomy and an expert on Mayan history, will provide historical, astronomical, and cosmological information. Mendez, an artist with a background in Mexican history, having grown up in Chiapas, will discuss the cultural components of the voyage, including the art and murals they will encounter along the way. .

In Mayan and Aztec culture, chocolate served as much more than a simple food or drink. In Mesoamerican society, according to Sophie and Michael Coe, chocolate, in both the form of bean and elixir, was used as a religious symbol, as a form of currency, as a sacred

ceremonial tool, as a treat reserved for lords, warriors and nobility, and for times of celebration. As Sciscenti further explains, chocolate was revered as “a gift from the gods,” and the “food of the gods,” and was served with spices and *chile* in the form of a drink.

Whenever possible, Kakawa Chocolate House elixirs forsake modern ingredients of wheat, refined sugar and dairy products, employing agave syrup and honey as preferred sweeteners. Using no artificial flavors and a blend of *trinitario* beans loaded with *criollo* genes (the highest quality of beans in the world), Mark creates healthy alternatives to modern chocolates without sacrificing a single note of flavor. To the elation of many diabetics and wheat-, dairy-, and sugar-sensitive consumers, Sciscenti produces what he calls a “rich, strong, bittersweet, and seasoned concoction that is unlike any hot chocolate drink available commercially.” With different elixirs and recipes from around the world, Sciscenti has carved a genuinely unique niche in the community of chocoholics in Santa Fe.

For Sciscenti, chocolate is more than a trivial means of gratification. It is a profound spiritual way to connect to the earth. Using chocolate elixirs in ceremonies ranging from baptisms and guided meditations to weddings and scholarly lectures, Sciscenti is reviving forgotten practices from ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. “In this day and age I think western culture is divorced from the earth,” Sciscenti reflects. “So when people ask, I’ll do chocolate ceremonies to get into a place of connection with the earth.” Suggesting that drinking large volumes of the substance puts one into a controlled trance, Sciscenti believes that chocolate enhances meditation, and provides a path for journeying into oneself and the world.

Referred to as a “chemical kaleidoscope” by Sophie and Michael Coe, chocolate can produce psychotropic and euphoric experiences. As Sciscenti further explains, since chocolate is composed of between 300 and 1,200 naturally-occurring chemicals, it can act as an antidepressant, an antioxidant, and has even been rumored to act as an aphrodisiac. For example, phenyl ethylamine (or PEA) is a chemical in chocolate responsible for triggering anti-depressants in the brain similar to those released when one falls in love.

Despite all of these benefits, Sciscenti expresses caution. “You have to kind of take it with a grain of salt,” he admits. “There are a lot of antioxidants and health benefits to a whole lot of other foods. Chocolate is just a part of the puzzle.” To a degree, however, as every true chocolate lover knows, the love chemicals, endorphins, and antioxidants present in dark chocolates can stimulate momentary forms of euphoria and bliss for the consumer. It is because of this principle that in ceremony, Sciscenti uses his bittersweet potions to bring people into an altered state.

Modifying the ritual of chocolate baptisms native to Mayan culture, cited by Sophie and Michael Coe, Sciscenti uses the anointing process to return people from the trance state in guided meditations. In the Mesoamerican version of the ceremony, an extravagantly dressed priest anointed boys and girls on their foreheads, faces, and in between their fingers and toes with a mix of liquid chocolate, crushed flowers, and pure water from tree hollows. This ritual was meant to purify and welcome those anointed into the world of adulthood.

Another form of ritual which Sciscenti performs is a marriage ceremony. Coming from an ancient Pagan principle of nurturing one’s spouse – similar to feeding one another cake at a wedding – husband and wife can feed each other chocolate elixir in a loving display of nurturance. “You nurture the other,” says Sciscenti, “and when you physically feed the other person; you’re not just feeding them food, you’re feeding them a part of yourself.”

Unfortunately, every yin has its yang. Chocolate also has a “dark” side. Sciscenti laments that without a regulated market, cacao farmers only see a small fraction of the proceeds of production, as faceless conglomerates claim the majority of earnings, inevitably leading to virtual slave labor in many third world countries. To compound this complex and unjust situation, the tree *Theobroma cacao*, which grows exclusively in the lower elevations of the rainforest twenty degrees north and south of the equator, has itself suffered much misfortune due to poor harvesting practices, lack of biodiversity, and low levels of survivability.

Today Africa is the leading producer of cacao crops. As is usually the case when crops are transferred from one part of the world to another, the major consideration has been short-term financial gain, rather than the long-term health of the environment. With few varieties of beans transplanted to Africa, the majority coming from the *Forastero* tree, the largest yielding but poorest tasting variety, a great loss in genetic diversity and biodiversity has resulted. This has left cacao strikingly susceptible to disease and crop failure. Simply stated, if two plants have the same genetics, they will both be killed by the same disease. In recent years, 40 percent of the world’s cacao crop has been lost to disease, exacerbating financial problems in the third world.

Making matters even worse, sun-grown plantations are rapidly replacing the natural shade-grown plantations to which cacao trees are accustomed. Sun-grown plantations are multiplying because they yield more cacao crops at a faster rate even though flavor is sacrificed and vulnerability to sickness is increased. Furthermore, precious rainforest is being destroyed to produce the clear cut fields of the sun-grown plantations – and this for a crop that prefers the shade, richness of soil, and pollinators of the rainforest itself. With so many problems spinning out of control, Sciscenti looks for solutions.

Hoping someday to own a cacao plantation in the birthplace of chocolate, Sciscenti plans to set an example for the future of cacao growth. “Rainforests are the lungs of the planet,” he sighs. “There is an incredible wealth of healing plants in the rainforest, and we probably don’t know about 95% of them.”

Convinced that chocolate and the rainforest can coexist, Sciscenti holds the belief that quality rather than quantity is the solution, and that the rainforest does not have to be destroyed at the expense of our collective sweet tooth. Hoping to someday give life to cacao in its natural habitat, beneath spindly, leafy giants, in the shade and humidity of the rainforest, Sciscenti insists that he can demonstrate the sustainable, diverse, and healthy growth of *Theobroma cacao*. “Small amounts of good quality beans will blow away any bean that’s out there,” he announces confidently.

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