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Chocolate Covered History

Every day, standing behind a table in a room in a little house behind Boston's Old North Church, a woman in a bonnet grinds down cocoa nibs on a *metate* heated over a hot plate, demonstrating how chocolate was made in colonial times. Today, the woman is named Nicole.

She holds up a replica cocoa pod the size, shape, and weight of a Nerf football, while describing how cocoa is harvested. Even though she's decked head-to-toe in period garb, she's chosen to avoid the past-as-present tense weirdness that most living-history reenactors fall into ("Have you heard the news of Mad King George?!"), and mercifully refers to the current era as "today." As she grinds, the chocolate nibs smoosh into a shiny paste, and she invites the audience to add in spices like cinnamon, star anise, and cayenne pepper, which are laid out in little dishes on the table like a TV chef's onscreen mise en place. A Swedish boy in a trilby sprinkles in some nutmeg.

At the end of the demo, Linda, another bonneted employee who has been manning the register, comes around with a tray of shallow plastic cups half full of hot liquid chocolate, the preferred colonial format, and we all slurp it down.

It's thick and bitter, with a heart-pumping kick like espresso. You can clearly taste the spices. It's a little like someone steeped potpourri in double-strength dark chocolate Swiss Miss. A collective *yum*, enriched with new historical perspective, emerges from the crowd.

Then Nicole spills the beans. Despite her arduous grinding and the Swedish boy's spicing, the samples we just consumed are not metate-fresh. "What we'll be drinking here," she says, "is developed for us by the American Heritage Chocolate division of the Mars chocolate company, who did extensive research with Colonial Williamsburg to come up with this authentic colonial drinking chocolate." The historical chocolate we just drank was made from prepackaged, factory-produced, historically accurate shredded-chocolate mix. And if we liked it, we could buy some American Heritage Historic Chocolate right

here at Captain Jackson's Historical Chocolate Shop. Linda is already back to manning the register.

All around the demo table, shelves are stocked with American Heritage chocolate, candies, and cakes. The grainy, slightly spicy chocolate itself comes in three different formats: thirteen-ounce canisters of shredded-chocolate drink mix ($21.95), six-ounce solid blocks "for baking and grating" ($11.95), and chocolate sticks about the size of Slim Jims ($1.75 a pop). The American Heritage logo is a circular portrait of a woman dressed like Nicole and Linda, sitting at a small table, drinking chocolate. The label confirms: it is in fact made by Mars, the massive, privately held company that produces M&M'S, Snickers, and Twix; owns Wrigley, the maker of Skittles, Starburst, and many gums; and also makes Uncle Ben's Rice, FLAVIA pod coffee, and thirty-five brands of pet food. But, as Nicole tells a fellow tourist, you can only find American Heritage chocolate at gift shops like this.

At this point, any red-blooded American consumer with a feel for how capitalism works might rightly think: *What?* Why would a huge company like Mars go to the trouble of making expensive, intentionally odd-tasting, ostensibly historically accurate chocolate? And why would they then sell it exclusively to a retail market that's both tiny and painfully uncool? It's like finding out that Gap makes tunics and tabards for sale at Renaissance fairs, or that Pepsi makes Moxie. Is this some kind of complicated cover-up? Court-mandated community service? Did Mars lose a bet?

There seems to be a point in the life of many American men at which they begin to crave historical research. For some, this craving leads to an *Ancestry.com* account and vacation days spent wandering around unfamiliar and untouristed towns named after a theoretical eighth-great-grand. For others, the vacation days go to Civil War battlefield tours and hours spent trekking over inconspicuous copses, eyeing en- and defilades while pondering the enormity of shooting your neighbors.

Only then, once the craving for historical detail has advanced to an obsession, does historical accuracy enter the picture. The hours collapse down into documenting details and counting stitches—this is the phase at which one might spend an afternoon ensuring that the font for the stencil on your replica ammo box does, in fact, reflect the prevailing typographical technology of Union cavalry ammo-box stencilists of the early war. This is when even an unhandy man might annex a part of the house (basement, garage, spare room) as a workshop; when even a man who has never posted anything on Facebook might start meeting up with friends from a particular online forum and then post albums of photos of these meetings.

But if you're Rodney Snyder, the Director of Chocolate History Research for Mars Chocolate North America, and a man with some influence in the largest chocolate company in the world, this is when you say, "It's high time we made some historically accurate chocolate."

Snyder looks and sounds like you'd hope a scientist at a chocolate factory might—plump, goateed, and bald, with an even-toned yet clearly enthused voice and an eagerness to discuss the minutiae of cocoa sourcing or flavanol processing. He's only ever worked at Mars, for all twenty-eight years of his professional life. For most of those, he was a cocoa man, one of the company's top tasters of nibs, with a nose and a palate capable of distinguishing between a Venezuelan *Criollo* and an Ecuadorian *Nacional*.

He never meant to become a history guy; and even though he grew up two miles from the plant in Hackettstown, PA, where he's spent the last three decades of his life, Snyder never even meant to work at Mars. Nine months after finishing his agricultural engineering degree, back at home and unemployed, he saw an ad in the paper for a food-science tech job and applied.

Chocolate would become his life's work, but it took a chance encounter in Singapore for the history bug to take hold. Killing time in the airport one day, on his way to Sulawesi, Indonesia, where he was helping set up a new cocoa-processing factory, a book caught his eye. It was *The Book of Chocolate* by Jeanne Bourin, an illustrated history of everything cocoa from ancient Mesoamerica to today. "It was beautiful," Snyder says, and he was hooked.

He started buying up any chocolate-history book he could find, from mass-market overviews, to rare technical manuals from the turn of the twentieth century. By day, he was an industrial-cocoa-processing expert, determining the necessary mix for the next big run of M&M'S based on that year's crop, or troubleshooting creaminess problems in the latest run of Dove Bars. By night, he immersed himself in chocolate history. He believes that his six-hundred-volume chocolate-history library, organized chronologically by publication date, is the world's largest private collection on the topic.

Snyder never set out to bring all this chocolate history to life—as far as he was concerned, today's chocolate was the best chocolate, and the past was just that.

But in 2003, living history had a meeting with Mars.

"Colonial Williamsburg had put together a program on chocolate making with a gentleman there named Jim Gay," Snyder says. "He thought he was coming to give us the history, we thought he was coming to get the history from us, and it was amazing to find out that we had two different slices of the chocolate story." More than a decade later, the wonder of this revelation is still in Snyder's voice.

Colonial Williamsburg, for those

whose teachers or parents didn't drag them there as a kid, is the biggest, richest living-history museum in the country. John D. Rockefeller Jr. paid to have the historically accurate section built on top of a large swath of the nonhistorical, real, live town of Williamsburg, Virginia, in the 1920s. When the park peaked in popularity in the 1970s, it had more than 3,500 employees. Things have slowed down in the past twenty years, but Colonial Williamsburg is still the crown jewel of the living-history world.

Jim Gay, who passed away in 2012, was an ex-Navy pilot and Colonial Williamsburg's in-house chocolate guy. (Norfolk, just down the road from Williamsburg, is home to the biggest Navy base in the country—some of the staff have military roots.) In the early aughts, Gay started giving historically accurate chocolate-making demos in the huge kitchen of the Governor's Palace, based on his own research. He'd weighed the advantages and disadvantages of using a metate versus something called a four-legged saddle quern, wheedled whole beans from Scharffen Berger, and cobbled together a historical recipe for spicy drinking chocolate. (Unfortunately, only he and his fellow costumed craftsmen were allowed to taste it. State health codes are not known to get swept up in the historical spirit of things.)

Back then, Snyder told me, the history section of the mandatory three-day employee training at Mars was only five minutes long, "and when I look back on it, about half *that* stuff was wrong." People had written histories of chocolate, but they tended to stick close to the Cortés story: chocolate as pre-Columbian ritual spice bomb, followed by chocolate as sugary European delicacy, totally ignoring the American colonies in between. For Mars's purposes, modern chocolate history began in the 1850s, when a flurry of technological innovation transformed chocolate from thick, hot beverage to a shelf-stable, melt-in-your-mouth-not-in-your-hand candy. Anything earlier was practically Stone Age.

But Gay and his colleagues would be quick to point out that chocolate has deeper roots in American culture. As early as 1682, mills in colonial New England began dedicating some grind time to processing the cocoa beans that were coming in from the Caribbean trade, each mixing in their own secret blends of exotic spices. In 1735, Benjamin Franklin was selling chocolate out of his printing shop in Philadelphia. Benedict Arnold—a pharmacist in Connecticut before he became a dirty rotten traitor—listed chocolate among his available herbal supplements in a 1765 New Haven newspaper ad. Fourteen years later a portion of drinking chocolate was a part of the Continental Army's daily rations as they fought for American independence. As the end of the eighteenth century approached, chocolate turned from an expensive, occasional treat—something like the nice bottle of whiskey you bust out for fancy company—to a regular part of daily life. Upper-middle-class kitchens would have a specialized chocolate pot, with a built-in frother stick poking through a hole in the lid and a sturdy handle angling out from the side to provide enough leverage for a solid frothing. Turn over a few tricorn-hatted rocks, and you'll find that chocolate's everywhere in colonial America.

Learning about this forgotten American chapter of chocolate history changed the course of Snyder's career: "We looked at ourselves and said, 'How can we even consider ourselves chocolate experts?'"

He started meeting with other interested employees on weekends and after work to talk colonial chocolate. Mars invented the title of Director of Chocolate History Research for him a few years ago, once it was clear that he was done being a chocolate-tasting scientist and had become a fully committed chocolate scholar. To Mars's credit, it's a transition that, in many companies, would probably result in a further transition, out of the workforce.

But, in what might be the most baffling part of this whole thing, before American Heritage Chocolate first rolled off the production line in 2006, Snyder's chocolate-history division began a different effort to publish a vast, authoritative, academic textbook on American chocolate history.

Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage, published in 2009, is about the size and heft of a middle-school algebra textbook, and clocks in just shy of one thousand glossy pages. In Captain Jackson's Chocolate Shop, back at Old North, a copy sits biblically on a wooden lectern by the window, opened to the chapter about Boston's chocolate history.

Before the book, there was something called the Chocolate History Research Group (CHRG) at UC Davis, which began as a one-off Mars-funded research project on chocolate history in the late nineties. Davis is a big agricultural school, and Mars had funded chocolate-science studies there for years, but this was their first jump into the humanities.

Once Jim Gay lit the living-history fire at Mars, though, things took off. First, they convened a group of living-history specialists, the Colonial Chocolate Society. Then Snyder got back in touch with Louis Grivetti, the chocolate expert at Davis, and proposed that the CHRG get back together to make this massive book, with full funding from Mars. Grivetti agreed, pulled together scholars from across North America and Europe, and made *Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage* happen.

Some selected chapters:

"C" Is for Chocolate: Chocolate and Cacao as Educational Themes in 18th Century North America

How Much Is That Cocoa in the

Window? Cocoa's Position in the Early American Marketplace

Cure or Confection? Chocolate in the Portuguese Royal Court and Colonial Hospitals, 1580–1830

Commercial Chocolate Pots: Reflections of Cultures, Values, and Times

Base Metal Chocolate Pots in North America: Context and Interpretation

Is It A Chocolate Pot? Chocolate and Its Accoutrements in France from Cookbook to Collectible

Silver Chocolate Pots of Colonial Boston

One short chapter toward the end of the book describes how Snyder and his fellow Martians came up with American Heritage Chocolate. It begins sexily enough, quoting Denis Diderot as a major source for how the eighteenth-century chocolate came to be, but then shifts to the dry language of a scientific journal article. Initial goals are set and processes undertaken. And there, laid out in harsh black and white, is the paradox lurking at the heart of this complicated quest for historical accuracy: Mars is trying to use modern equipment to make a preindustrial product, rendered obsolete by new technology and new tastes, in such a way that twenty-first-century Americans will want to eat it.

Chocolate isn't a food like tomatoes or bread, where the march of progress has meant trading flavor for growing or storage efficiency; half of what most people even like about chocolate is a product of industrialization. First, in 1828, a Dutch fellow named Coenraad Johannes van Houten figured out that doctoring raw chocolate with alkaline salts removed its bitterness. He then figured out a way to press the cocoa fat out of raw crushed nibs, yielding a consistent and more shelf-stable chocolate powder ("Dutch cocoa"). Nineteen years later, a British company, J.S. Fry & Sons, added some of the fat back in to allow for the creation of a moldable chocolate bar, and thirty years after that, a Swiss chocolatier named Daniel Peter combined Henri Nestlé's condensed milk with liquid reduced-fat chocolate mush (called "liquor" in the industry) to make milk chocolate. Finally, in 1979, Rodolphe Lindt invented the chocolate conche, a machine shaped vaguely like a shell (hence the name) that mixes and agitates liquid chocolate for days on end, distributing the fat more evenly through the mixture and supposedly "polishing" the chocolate particles suspended in the fat, ultimately making for a chocolate that tastes mellower, has a smoother texture, and is more aromatic.

Preindustrial chocolate was bitter, fatty, gritty, and not exactly shelf-stable. It was not a thing you unwrapped and enjoyed. It was a thing you bought in bulk from the local chocolate mill or general store, grated into a chocolate pot, mixed with boiling water, and vigorously beat with a frother. It was heavily spiced, partly to mask the inconsistency between batches and seasons, and possibly to hide the nasty taste of cocoa that had gone bad during the long, salty boat trip from the tropics. So making this edible artifact of older, patently inferior technology into something appealing to modern consumers meant yielding some ground on the historical accuracy front. Or, to go back to the book: "An emphasis on recipe accuracy was critical during this formulation testing stage. And while recipe accuracy was critical, the 'end-product' chocolate also had to taste good in order to be commercially viable in the marketplace."

As Snyder puts it: "If they knew how to make a Dove chocolate bar in colonial America, they'd be making it."

Snyder told me that early in the development of American Heritage Chocolate they had experimented with a different format—a triangle about the size of a poker chip made mostly out of nearly unprocessed cocoa nibs, based on historical accounts of a coarse chocolate candy in this shape. "It looked so fancy, and tasted so good," he says, "people just did not believe it was historic," despite its coarser, more historically accurate texture.

I asked to go check out American Heritage's Elizabethtown factory, but was rebuffed by unspecified production scheduling difficulties. They sent me photos, though, and described the current process: they rejiggered a grinder to keep the chocolate chunks larger, came up with a novel tempering process to imitate the blobby texture of chocolate before people discovered how to temper it, and retrofitted an extruding machine to be intentionally imperfect, making each stick or block of American Heritage seem just flawed enough to be "historical." As a final touch, a "spicy dusting powder [is] hand applied, then brushed off," giving the sticks and blocks the drab matteness we expect of the past.

Denied a tour of the American Heritage HQ, I spend the Friday of Labor Day weekend driving from NYC to Colonial Williamsburg, only encountering a traffic jam once I hit the woodsy four-lane highway that splits off from Richmond down toward the Virginia Peninsula. The historical part of the campus is organized around Duke of Gloucester Street, Colonial Williamsburg's packed-gravel version of Main Street USA, lined with squat brick buildings and vacant expanses of shadeless squares; right across a paved road are the fully modernized Williamsburg Inn and Williamsburg Lodge, which together make up a vast hotel, spa, and event space complex. Each half of the campus is hidden from the other, but it's much easier to get lost in the endless carpeted corridors of the Inn than it is in the flat grid of the historical side.

Here, the living-history reenactors make no bones about using the present tense to refer to the past. There's none of that Ren Faire giddiness, and you get the sense that it would be rude to be historically accurate back at the reenactors—they're there to educate, not play make-believe.

I had come with two historical-chocolatey missions in mind. I wanted to see the Mars Chocolate History Ambassadors, the uniformed but uncostumed team of Mars employees who were there for a weekend-long food festival hosted in the Inn-and-Lodge complex. And I wanted to stop by R. Charlton's Coffeehouse, a recently reconstructed eighteenth-century building that now serves American Heritage Chocolate.

First, the Ambassadors. These are not people employed by the Historic Division of Mars, but regular employees from all over the corporation who volunteer to spend their weekends flying to events around the country and educating people about chocolate history. Like Nicole at Old North, they have the whole metate setup, and they occasionally waggle a grinding stone around to show a curious onlooker how it works.

Snyder told me that they have a roster of more than one hundred employees from across the company signed up to be Ambassadors, and the crew at Colonial Williamsburg, who were manning a folding table in a huge convention hall alongside wine dealers, cider makers, and cheesemongers, supported that claim. Rich works on the line at the New Jersey M&M plant and wears a gold crucifix under his regulation American Heritage polo. Christina says she's in management, Dave is a regional sales guy, and John, a scientist, says at one point in the distant past he was Rodney Snyder's boss. Despite my insistent prodding, they all deny that they are getting paid to be here.

I asked because it's Labor Day Weekend, and they're spending it in a huge carpeted event space in Colonial Williamsburg, telling the increasingly distracted and wine-drunk crowd of foodie boomers about the intricacies of chocolate-pod harvesting. From their booth, I watch a brief chocolate-and-Scotch-pairing presentation on the nearby event stage. A white-haired couple chimes in from the audience with strong opinions about the highest cocoa percentage that should be eaten with single malts, based on private tastings they'd held at home. The Ambassadors remain upbeat and helpful throughout the day, and have to do the same thing all over again tomorrow.

The $5 million donation that allowed for the recent restoration of R. Charlton's Coffeehouse came directly from Deborah and Forrest Mars Jr., a man who, along with his siblings Jacqueline and John, came in 26th in Forbes' most recent ranking of the richest people in the world. (Based on estimated valuations of Mars, Inc., which the three siblings own in its entirely, the siblings have a net worth of $23.5 billion each.)

There might not be a gas station in the country without a rack of Snickers and M&M'S in front of the register, but the company that makes them is famous for its obscurity—the Mars family not only refuses to give interviews (including for this article), but refuses to even be photographed. Until the early nineties, they refused to share the company's financial statements with their own bank, fearing the information might somehow get out. Forrest Jr. once told a group of Duke business students that "the ability to be secretive is one of the finest benefits of having a private company," and he continues to hold that privilege in high esteem.

What little public information that's out there leads me to conclude that the eighty-three-year-old Forrest Jr. is a living-history geek. He donated well over $11 million to build an education center at Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York (though withdrew before finishing the payments after a drawn-out fight with Fort Ti's director). He's given $11 million, including the five for the coffeehouse, to Colonial Williamsburg since 2007. While I was there I kept my eyes peeled for an exceptionally old and well-dressed historical interpreter slouching down Duke of Gloucester Street, but didn't find any evidence of the Mars magnate playing dress-up. It seems like he spends most of his time playing rancher on his spread out in Wyoming, in the nice part, near Jackson Hole.

"It's not a charity," says Gail Broadright, director of Mars Properties, about American Heritage Chocolate. "But, we don't profit on it. There aren't any other brands like it in the profile."

She explains that American Heritage is in fact a part of the for-profit Mars, Inc., but falls under the auspices of a subsidiary group called Mars Chocolate North America, which as of yet is only responsible for the Chocolate History/American Heritage project. They sell the chocolate to the living history museums at cost, but they aren't just giving it away.

I asked if the Mars family, and Forrest Jr., in particular, might have a special interest in this whole thing.

"What I can tell you is that they're very involved," Broadright says. "Forrest is extremely involved, but John and Jacqueline are passionate about this as well."

In the past year, Mars has begun giving out grants to historical sites interested in expanding their chocolate programming—in the first year, Old North Church, Fort Ticonderoga, and Colonial Williamsburg were the winners. I asked a little more about the focus on living-history museums.

"The bottom line is that [chocolate] is an engagement tool to help draw visitors in" to the chocolate demonstrations

and historical displays of their living history museums, Broadright says.

But what is Mars getting out of this?

"This is their legacy," she tells me. "We have our big brands like Snickers and M&M'S, but because we're family owned, we enjoy the ability to leave a legacy and talk cocoa history and cocoa sustainability."

Faced with the silence of the Mars family itself, I ask Snyder if there is some kind of business term for this kind of thing—a break-even, educational, historically accurate candy bar.

"We don't really have a term. We just don't profit on this brand," Snyder says. "But we do profit on M&M'S."

So far as I can tell, there's nothing dark or nefarious about American Heritage Chocolate, no tax incentive, not even much of a PR boost. The closest I can get to answering the question of why, exactly, this exists at all is as follows: they've got the money, they've got a Mars who's into living-history museums, and they've got a Rodney Snyder. Why not?

I wait around on the porch of R. Charlton's Coffeehouse with a group of tourists for the costumed "proprietor" to invite us in for a drink. Two little kids won't stop fidgeting and whisper-yelling at each other. Once we enter the first room of the little building, the proprietor has to pause mid-spiel to give them a stern look.

Mr. Charlton, it turns out, was also a wigmaker in his spare time, and we can see through a half-open closet door the tools of that trade, displayed as if left in a hurry by a generally neat man. The wallpaper inside is thick, dark green and gold. The tour guide talks up the role of coffee, tea, and chocolate as stimulants and fomenters of seditious talk in the colonies—it was served alongside coffee at the first wave of coffeehouses, which were famous as loci of overcaffeinated political debates in the colonies.

In the final room of the tour we all sit down to drink little cups of our choice of coffee, tea, or, drinking chocolate. I sit next to a family that, to my astonishment, is visiting Colonial Williamsburg on vacation from England. A "small businessman" reenactor loitering around the coffeehouse in costume is beyond thrilled to engage in some light ribbing of his historical oppressors from "the mother country," who incorrectly guess that there's ginger in the drinking chocolate. At first, the British mom says, "It wouldn't be my choice of beverage," but she warms to it once she tries it with some cream.

Mars, Inc. wasn't founded until 1911 in Tacoma, Washington, more than 130 years after the conversation we're having in the coffeehouse is supposed to be set. To maintain the illusion of historical accuracy—as much historical accuracy as you can have in a room of people taking pictures with their iPhones—the company that had not only painstakingly re-created the historical chocolate we were drinking but also paid for the restoration of the house in which it was being served remains unmentioned during the tour.

M&M'S World New York is a giant store in Times Square dedicated exclusively to selling M&M'S and M&M'S-related merchandise. Here, you can get M&M'S backpacks, toothbrush cups, place settings and watches, stuffed plush M&M'S, staple removers studded with plastic replicas of M&M'S, and as many pounds of M&M'S as you choose to dispense into plastic bags from the colorful arrays of clear, M&M'S-filled, ten-foot tubes that line the walls like the pipes of an organ in the Church of Chocolate.

I went there on a day in November to see Rodney Snyder, who I found sitting next to a fully stocked American Heritage Chocolate demo table on the hard-to-find third floor. Snyder and the demo table were there to announce that M&M'S World New York would now be carrying American Heritage Chocolate. Across from the demo table, a column of shelves was stocked with American Heritage Chocolate products. Signs illustrated with M&M'S in George Washington getups explained what American Heritage Chocolate was.

Snyder and I took a few steps over to the third floor's balcony, overlooking the cavernous and multicolored domain below, to speak of historically accurate things. He told me that he had written a chapter called "Cocoa, the Heart of Cacao" for the upcoming *Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*. His wife, a *New York Times*–bestselling fantasy novelist, helped with the writing. He was also working on some kind of keyboard that would let you play "chords" made of the spices that go into American Heritage Chocolate, allowing consumers to build the metaphorical harmony of a spice blend and hear how discordant tasting notes like mustard seed (which was often milled using the same mill and inadvertently mixed by some colonial chocolatiers with their cocoa) could make it come out all wrong.

But he was most excited about the "panned" (candy-coated) American Heritage product—old-timey M&M'S—that he'd been developing back at the plant, after having found some evidence for their existence in the eighteenth century. They're made with natural, historically accurate food coloring for the shells, slightly lumpy, and larger than regular M&M'S—about the size of almonds. They're not in full-scale production yet, but Snyder told me his desktop jar of prototypes keeps disappearing: "The spices put a little burn in your throat," he said, "and then you just keep reaching for more."

He spoke of a possible future for the Heritage M&M'S within the store's huge tube arrays, their natural dyes shining dull and historic at one end of the M&M'S spectrum. He envisioned a label describing them as "the grandfather of M&M'S," possibly with more cartoon M&M'S wearing George Washington getups. When I asked if he might be plotting to turn M&M'S World into a full-on colonial chocolate emporium, Snyder laughed it off. We'll see. LP