Chocolate and Other Colonial Beverages

Frank Clark

Introduction

We begin the discussion of cocoa and its role among beverages of the 18th century by classifying the types of beverages available at the time. Eighteenth century beverages in North America—as elsewhere—can be divided into two main categories: alcoholic and nonalcoholic. Alcoholic beverages were more important and—while consumers did not know about or understand microbial organisms—provided a safe drinking alternative in a time before pasteurization and modern water supplies. As a category, alcoholic beverages can be further subdivided into various fermented varieties—beer, cider, or wine—and distilled beverages or, as they were called then, "strong drink" or "aqua vita." The nonalcoholic drinks also can be subdivided into two categories: those served cold and those served hot. The present chapter examines each of these categories to obtain a basic understanding of the various libations, how they were made, how they were viewed by society, and the role of chocolate as one of several options available.

We also start with the basic premise that consuming liquids is necessary for life and survival. In the long distant past when humans formed societies, procurement of safe beverages was a basic survival need. While this may seem like common sense, it was not easy to achieve before public water and sewage systems had been developed. Although early medical understanding was unable to adequately explain why, it was perhaps basic common knowledge that alcoholic beverages—in moderation—were safer and led to fewer illnesses than "ordinary" water. It may also have been held that alcoholic beverages were more "nutritious" than water. The ancient Romans had their varieties of wine, and before them the Egyptians as well. The primary beverage among both the Egyptians and Sumerians was beer—as was also initially characteristic of the English empire.

Alcoholic Beverages

MALT LIQUOR: ALES AND BEERS

When discussing beer, it is better to use the 18th century term "malt liquor." The reason for this distinction is that while both beverages were based on grain, definitions for beer and ale have changed over time. Malt liquors were natural choices for the English because of local climate. England’s northern climes are such that grains grow better than grapes. Indeed, there is evidence that the English have brewed beer for nearly 4000 years [1].

Malt beverages, of course, are made from grain. Grain is sprouted then placed in a kiln to stop the growth process. This process, called malting,
allows the natural starchy components in grains to begin their conversion into sugars. Malted grains are crushed, then mashed in hot water, a process that continues this conversion. The mashed, water-soaked grain then is removed and the resulting liquid is called wort. The wort then is boiled, yeast added, fermentation occurs, and malt liquor is produced.

A wide variety of beverages can be produced by this basic process. These beverages differ only by type of grain used, amount of time and temperature at which the grains are kiln-dried, and various flavor components added to the wort. The early English process of brewing often mashed the same grain two or three times: with each subsequent mashing, fewer sugars could be extracted, and beers of three descending strengths would be produced.

The oldest type of English malt beverage was called ale. Ale usually was made from malted barley, but might also be prepared from either oats or wheat. Without preservatives or refrigeration, ale soured quickly. To compensate for such "spoilage," medieval brewers added various spices and herbs to help flavor the brew. Mixtures of spices added to ale were known as gruit. Stephen Harrod Buhner has provided a nice description of gruit in his book, Sacred and Herbal Healing Beers:

Gruit was, primarily, a combination of three mild to moderately narcotic herbs; sweet gale (Myrica gale), also called bog myrtle, yarrow (Achillea millefolium), and wild rosemary (Ledum palustre), also called marsh rosemary. Gruit varied somewhat, each gruit producer adding additional herbs to produce unique tastes, flavors, and effects. Other adjunct herbs were juniper berries, ginger, caraway seed, aniseed, nutmeg, and cinnamon. The exact formula for each gruit was like that for Coca Cola, proprietary—a closely guarded secret. [2]

In Germany during the 9th century, brewers began to use hops (Humulus lupulus) as one of the herbs in brewing and soon realized that in addition to adding a bitter flavor, hops also helped to preserve the beverage. The use of hops spread slowly throughout northern Europe and eventually reached England by way of Holland sometime around 1450 [3]. After some early opposition, hops became fully accepted for use in brewing in England by the late 17th century. At this point there is some confusion about the terms beer and ale. Originally, the word ale meant a malt beverage made without hops, whereas beer was a malt beverage made with hops. By the late 17th century, however, all recipes for ale also contained hops. Some brewers then began to use the term ale to indicate the stronger beverage made from the first mashing of the grain, and the term beer to indicate the weaker second and third mashing, the last being called "small beer" [4].

Malt liquors were the traditional drink of England in addition to being the most popular. This is demonstrated by a quote from a French traveler who remarked in a letter:

Would you believe it, although water is to be had in abundance in London and of fairly good quality, absolutely none of it is drunk! The lower classes, even the paupers, do not know what it is to quench their thirst with water. In this country nothing but beer is drunk and it is made in several qualities. Small beer is what everyone drinks when thirsty; it is used even in the best houses and costs only a penny a pot. Another kind of beer is called porter . . . because the greater quantity is consumed by the working classes. It is a thick strong beverage and the effect that it produces if drunk in excess, is the same as wine. . . . It is said that more grain is consumed in England for making beer then bread. [5]

When the English began to colonize the New World, their preference for malt drinks went with them (Fig. 22.1). This preference was confirmed in an early letter from the Governor of the Virginia colony to the other members of the Virginia charter company. Francis Wyatt wrote in 1623:

To plant a colony by water drinkers was an inexcusable error in those who laid the first foundations. And have made it a received custom, which until it is laid down again there is little hope of health. [6]

Eventually brewers and better water supplies were located and more colonies were established, but it is clear that malt liquors were still quite popular. We can see this in a quote from Robert Beverly in his The History and Present State of Virginia when he wrote:

Their small drink is either wine and water, beer, milk and water or water alone. The richer sort generally brew their beer with malt, which they have from England, though they have as good barley of their own, as any in the world; but for want of malt houses, the inhabitants take no care to sow it. The poorer sort brews their beer with molasses and bran; with Indian corn malted by drying in a stove; with persimmons dried in cakes and baked; with potatoes; with the green stalks of Indian corn dried and cut small and bruised; with the Bates canedencis, or Jerusalem artichoke. [7]

WINES

The evidence is clear that beer was king of the fermented beverages, but wine was a close second, especially among the gentry. The climate of England made growing good wine grapes difficult. Wine, therefore, was imported and often faced stiff taxes and duties in addition to the basic economic cost of importation. The English of the 18th century preferred the strong sweet fortified wines of Portugal and the Madeira Islands. Such fortified wines were made by adding a distilled spirit, usually brandy, to a fermenting barrel of wine. The addition of alcohol stopped the fermentation process by killing the yeast. This gave such wines a sweeter flavor because the yeast otherwise would have continued to consume the sugars left in the wine, resulting in a "dry" wine. Such fortified wines included varieties known as Canary, Madeira, Port, and Sack.
Within the nonfortified wine category the English preferred the sweeter German Rein (i.e., Rhein) wines or Rennish as they were known, to the drier French wines, even though the wines of Burgundy already were famous. Wine terminology during this period referred to wines not based on the grape variety but upon their place of origin. Wines imported to England or North America were often relatively expensive because of taxes placed for political reasons and to protect the English brewing and distilling industries.

In the 21st century it is common to think of wine as being exclusively produced from grapes, but because grapes did not do well in England an examination of period cookbooks reveals that the English made “wine” from a wide variety of fruits, the more popular being blackberry, cherry, currant, peach, plum, raspberry, and strawberry. But even less well-known fruits such as elderberry and gooseberry were used as well. These fruit juices often had sugar added to them to increase their alcoholic strength [8].

In addition to fruit wines, the English were hopeful that the New World would prove to be a good place to grow grapes. There were numerous early attempts to grow vine grapes in colonial Virginia. John Custis, for example, attempted to establish a vineyard in the vicinity of Williamsburg. Thomas Jefferson, a colonial Virginian very enamored of wine, viewed Virginia as a perfect place for its production, a view that led him to make a gift of 193 acres to an Italian winemaker, Phillip Mazzei. Mazzei, however, never was financially successful at winemaking in Virginia and most of his grapes died within the first two years of his farming operation. Still, Jefferson continued to believe that the New World was a good place to grow grapes. Eventually, after the conquest of phylloxera (Daktulosphaira vitifoliae) in the 19th century, and understanding of the role of sulfur in controlling...
fungus that attacked vines in eastern North America, Jefferson’s vision proved to be correct—especially in California [9].

In addition to drinking wine “straight” (i.e., without mixing with water), the English often used it in various mixed drinks. The most popular were spiced or mulled wines created by adding sugar and spices then heating. There were also wine-based punches popular at the time, especially a type imported from Spain called *sangria*.

Because of costs associated with importation and taxes, wine was the most expensive alcoholic beverage by volume available in North America, as revealed in the Alexandria Virginia Hastings Court Records of 1786. The records list the cost of a quart of Madeira wine at 6 shillings. For the same price consumers could purchase a gallon of peach or apple brandy, whereas a quart of porter beer sold for 2 shillings and a quart of cider for 77 pence [10].

**CIDER**

Technically, cider can be considered a form of wine because its sugar comes from a fruit, but we will treat it here as a separate entity because of its economic and social importance. Cider is produced by squeezing apples using a press. The extracted juice begins as a nonalcoholic beverage but ultimately ferments due to yeast on the apple skin (or added yeasts) and ultimately can yield up to 10 percent alcohol. Historically, cider has been a popular beverage in England, especially in the apple growing areas of Hertford and Kent. Because it was produced locally and cheaply, cider commonly has been the drink of farmers, allowing a reasonable distinction to be drawn: beer in urban areas—cider in rural areas.

When the English colonized the New World they brought varieties of apples with them. The New World proved to be an excellent place to grow apples and many new cider varieties actually were developed here, including the Hews crab apple and the white crab apple. Cider, in turn, often is composed of several apple varieties combined to produce distinctive blends that range in flavor between sweet and sour. Economically, cider was very important in North America because it provided early farmers a means to preserve and transport apples in a more convenient form [11].

**DISTILLED BEVERAGES IN GENERAL (Aqua Vita)**

Distillation requires both fermentation and specialized equipment. The making of *aqua vitae*—“water of life”—starts with fermentation. The fermented beverage is heated in a still, sometimes called an alembic. As alcohol has a lower boiling point than water, it evaporates sooner than water. By keeping their stills at the “correct” constant heat, producers of *aqua vitae* boiled-off the alcohol, which then condensed in long tubes or coils and was collected. Alcohol thus obtained could then be used to make a range of beverages. The type of distilled drink produced depends on the type of fermented beverage being processed: distilling malted barley results in Scotch whiskey; distilling a mix of sour, fermented corn and sugar produces bourbon; distilling molasses and water yields rum; distilled wine results in brandy. Adding various flavorings to the basic fermented beverage being distilled produces gin and schnapps. The distillation process prevents the formation of vinegar, and beverages can be produced that can last for many years—economic implications not lost on our North American ancestors.

The origins of distilling are unclear but may represent a discovery that happened independently in a number of cultures throughout history. Distillation clearly was a process developed by Muslim cultures in the Middle East, and it is likely through the Muslims that distillation initially was introduced to Europe. It is sometimes claimed that the distillation process was introduced to England via the Dutch, when English soldiers returning from war in Holland brought the process of gin-making home to England. While the exact route and date of the introduction to England may not be known, by the 17th and 18th centuries distilled beverages had eroded the popularity of traditional English fermented drinks.

**PUNCH**

Distilled beverages can be consumed plain, but as such they tend to be harsh on the mouth and they quickly intoxicate drinkers. To soften the “taste” and to slow intoxication, distilled spirits often were mixed with other liquids. These mixtures of distilled spirits, water, and spices became known as punch. Peter Brown has provided an explanation for the origin of the word *punch*:

> Punch as it became known, was a pugilistic mixture of arrack (distilled from coconut sap), water, lemon juice, sugar and spices. Its name probably derived from the Hindu punch meaning five, presumably referring to the number of ingredients. [12]

Punch became extremely popular in England and her colonies. Punch drinking could be a rather raucous affair. The famous 18th century painter William Hogarth provided an excellent social portrait of punch drinking in his painting, *A Modern Midnight Conversation*, where a number of obviously drunk gentlemen are depicted lounging around an extremely large punch bowl (Fig. 22.2). Punch, properly made, consisted of five ingredients (citrus, spices, spirits, sugar, and water) but cheaper or “lesser punches” also were widely available. Bumbo, for instance, was prepared from rum, sugar, and water. Grog, in contrast, was made by mixing only rum with water (and of course became famous as the beverage of choice of the
Alcoholic Beverages

royal navy). Milk punch was prepared using rum, milk, and various mixtures of spices. At some point milk punch began to be called nog (hence eggnog would be a “lesser punch” prepared from rum, milk, and nutmeg). Basically, punch could be constructed/prepared from a broad range of diverse ingredients on hand by merely combining them with whatever distilled spirits were available.

Punch also made the journey to the North American English colonies, where it became as popular as it was in the homeland. In the Virginia Colony the term punch included beverages prepared not only from arrack and rum, but also from local brandies. Brown pointed out in his book, Come Drink the Bowl Dry, that “many of these colonial concoctions also included peach brandy; Lord Botetourt had large quantities of this in his cellars in Williamsburg, together with copious supplies of the other ingredients used to formulate a social bowl” [13].

Punch became very important in social rituals of 18th century Virginians and was served at almost all social occasions including weddings, financial deals, elections, and even everyday gatherings of gentlemen. Punch bowls appear in the inventories of almost all gentry and even many middle-class citizens [14]. Archaeological excavations at Shields Tavern in Williamsburg revealed the broken parts to as many as 80 different punch bowls, indicating the popularity of punch in taverns [15].

With all this punch consumption taking place in the North American colonies, it would be easy to conclude that drunkenness regularly resulted (and was widespread). Such conclusions would be correct (Fig. 22.3). There was a fair amount of lip service paid to the importance of not getting too drunk, but drunkenness certainly occurred frequently in all levels of 18th century English and, by inference, North American “high society” as well. This view is reinforced by descriptions from a wide number of sources and evidenced from the following quote from a French traveler who described the aftermath of a gentry’s dinner:

At this point all the servants disappear. The ladies drink a glass or two of wine and at the end of a half an hour all go out together. It is then that the real enjoyment begins—there is not an Englishman who is not supremely happy at this particular moment. One proceeds to drink—sometimes in alarming measure. Everyone has to drink his turn, for the bottles make a continuous circuit of the table and the host takes note that everyone is drinking in his turn. After this has gone on for some time and when thirst has become inadequate reason for drinking, a fresh stimulus is supplied by the drinking of toasts, that is to say the host begins by giving the name of a lady; he drinks to her health and everyone is obliged to do likewise. After the host someone else gives a toast and everyone drinks to the health of everyone else’s lady. Then each member of the party names some man and the whole ceremony begins again. If more drinking is required fresh toasts are always on hand; politics can supply plenty. [16]

GIN

The wealthy consumed their distilled beverages in the form of punch because they could afford the citrus, spices, and sugar to make it. For the poor, however, their distilled drink was gin—often drunk straight and by the dram. Gin became a serious social and health problem in 18th century London. This was the direct result of the passage of laws that raised the tax on malt beverages and wines and reduced taxes on distilled spirits. Passage of these laws benefited the wealthy by giving them a cheap way to convert their surplus grain into the more durable and profitable commodity, aqua
The laws for retailing strong drink also were reduced so that individuals of different economic strata could open gin houses—and a great many did. All that was required for a cheap license was ownership of a still and access to spices and herbs. In some geographical districts of London three out of every four buildings retailed gin. The resulting flood of drunkenness shocked England and caused divisions in attitudes toward and perceptions of alcoholic beverages (Fig. 22.4) [17].

Socially, distilled spirits began to be viewed as dangerous and deadly, whereas fermented beverages were seen as healthy and nutritious. This view is reflected in a quotation from the Bishop of Oxford:

*Strong liquors produce in everyman a high opinion of their own merit; that they blow the latent spark of pride into flower and therefore, destroy all voluntary submissions, they put an end to subordination and raise every man on equal with his master.* [18]

Another version of the same idea was espoused by Sir Joseph Jekyll (Figs. 22.5 and 22.6):

*The fear of a house of correction, imprisonment, or danger of the gallows made little impression on the rabble who drank gin . . . People can not so soon nor so easily get drunk with beer as with gin.* [19]

**WHISKEY**

North Americans during the Colonial era also held a similar dual view of alcoholic beverages. But in North America, in contrast to England, the problem beverage was not gin but whiskey. This attitude was summed up by Thomas Jefferson when he wrote in a letter:

*I wish to see this beverage [beer] become the common instead of whiskey which kills one third of our citizens and ruins their families.* [20]

And just like gin in England there were interesting economic reasons why whiskey became an important product in North America. There is an excellent description of the economic argument for whiskey in *The Alcoholic Republic, an American Tradition*, by William Rorabach:

*The process of distillation interested Americans because it performed a vital economic function by transforming fragile, perishable, bulky, surplus fruits and grains into non-perishable spirits that could easily be stored, shipped, and sold.* [21]

There also were political reasons for the popularity of whiskey. During the American Revolution era, America’s source of cheap rum dried up when trade with the Caribbean colonies became illegal as a result of nonimportation agreements. Americans needed a new source for distilled beverages: American corn provided it. It then became patriotic to drink locally produced spirits rather than imported ones. Americans had created their own distilled spirit in the form of bourbon whiskey and were drinking more and more of it as the 19th century approached.

Despite the increased consumption of distilled spirits, or perhaps because of it, attitudes toward drinking continued to change in America. Rorabach has provided another description of these factors:

This change in mind was stimulated by a number of impulses among which were the spread of rationalist philosophy, the rise of mercantile capitalism, advances in science, particularly the science of medicine, and an all pervasive rejection of custom and tradition. [22]

The change in medical opinion regarding alcohol in America came from a source none other than the prominent Philadelphia physician, Doctor Benjamin Rush. He published a pamphlet in 1784 titled An Inquiry into the effects of Ardent spirits on the human mind and body. In this essay Rush blamed heavy alcohol consumption for such medical problems as vomiting, uncontrollable tremors, liver disease, and madness. The doctor recommended that alcohol consumption be limited to fermented beverages in moderate amounts. He also created a visual aid to make and reinforce this point, a “measuring device” that he called The Moral and Physical Thermometer, or Scale of Temperance (Fig. 22.7). Rush’s “thermometer”—consisting of two sides with written text/comments—listed the beverages from water to whiskey on one side and the vices, diseases, and punishment that resulted from consumption on the other. This “reference diagram” and other publications became popular with many citizens, who believed that alcoholic consumption was out of control, and were prominent pieces of information used frequently by the Temperance Movement, which began in the 1780s. Benjamin Rush, in fact, has been referred to as the Father of the American Temperance Movement.

There was strong support for the Temperance Movement in religious circles, and throughout the 18th century waves of religious revivalism swept through America, a phenomenon known as the Great Awakening. Religious tolerance was becoming more common and new freedoms allowed nontraditional religions like the Baptists and Methodists to gain large followings. These groups often took their religion on the road, traveling and holding revival meetings.
Quakers, and later Methodists and Baptists, began speaking out against alcohol and strong drink, and religious elements would remain an important part of the Temperance Movement throughout its lifetime [23].

Nonalcoholic Beverages

To this point we have examined the basic types of alcoholic drinks available in Colonial era North America, and we now turn to an exploration of nonalcoholic varieties. Previously we had divided this class of beverages into two categories: cold drinks and hot liquors. We will begin with cold drinks, although the term is misleading because these beverages were not served all that cold and never would have been served with ice as some are today. Commonly “cold” drinks in early North America were served at cellar temperature, around 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Nonalcoholic Beverages

WATER

The most obvious nonalcoholic cold beverage was water. Water, as previously mentioned, often was viewed with mistrust. The 16th century physician Andrew Borde summed up the early viewpoint of water with his statement: “Water is not wholesome, sole by its self for an Englishman” [24]. This view of water was especially prevalent in the cities where public sewage and unsanitary conditions meant water could be quite dangerous. Early settlers in Jamestown also had a good reason to distrust local water supplies. In New England, however, the situation was different, as described by William Bradford: “Our landing party discovered some spring water which in their great thirst was as pleasant to them as wine and beer had been in foretimes.” Eventually Governor Bradford decided that while the water (just described) was not as wholesome as the beer and wine of London, it was as good as any in the world and “wholesome enough to us that we may be contented therewith” [25].

Water originating from wells, especially those in large settlements or cities, was not as safe as spring water. River water quality and safety, of course, also varied depending on what was happening upstream. Spring water and rain water, therefore, were the safest forms, but water still was distrusted into the 19th century, as exemplified by a comment from John Bickerdyke, dated 1889: “Water is the purveyor of epidemics and hardly ever obtained pure by the working class” [26]. Water also formed the basis of the hot liquors, but with one important difference: in the manufacture/production of hot liquors water first was boiled. Why boiled water was safe was not well understood until the late 19th century.

Milk and Fruit Juices

Milk also was viewed with suspicion and only became an important beverage after development of pasteurization during the mid-19th century. Peter Brown has provided a good description of how milk was perceived in early America in his book, In Praise of Hot Liquors:

Milk, a substance we take so much for granted today was seen as moderately hot and moist but there persisted a basic mistrust of this product in the seventeenth century which prevented its widespread use. Ian Bersten [and others have] argued that many people of the Near East and elsewhere were unable to digest milk. . . . But whether or not individuals had digestive tract distress, the question of hygiene and freshness was foremost in their minds. [27]

Milk more often was used for cooking than drunk as a beverage. In addition to milk and water, early North Americans also drank various fruit juices, whether
Chapter 22 Chocolate and Other Colonial Beverages

274

prepared as lemonade or apple juice. Depending on freshness, these juices would have been nonalcoholic or at least low-alcoholic alternatives.

**Hot Liquors**

This group of beverages consists of tea, coffee, and chocolate and each arrived in England during the middle part of the 17th century. When these drinks were introduced to England they were viewed initially with suspicion because of the practice of consuming them hot. The prevailing medical theory of the time (see Chapter 6) generally held that consuming foods hotter than blood or milk from a cow could unbalance the body. Another factor that made these drinks unique is that each was bitter. The popularity of these hot drinks, therefore, depended on the introduction of sugar to make them more palatable to English tastes [28].

Sugar production had become one of the primary sources of income for the British empire, a situation made possible through the acquisition of sugarcane-growing colonies in the Caribbean coupled with British Navigation Acts that helped to control trade and shipping of goods from these English colonies to the European homeland. England also increased the size and skill of its navy to help establish further control of the seas. The expansion of the British Empire made imported goods that were once rare and costly cheaper and available to a wider segment of the population. The cost of many imported goods began to slowly decline as the 17th and 18th centuries progressed. The most important of these imported commodities was sugar; the gradual price decline affected the cost of chocolate, coffee, tea, and various spices as well [29]. Hot liquids were considered luxuries and therefore subject to taxation, and the tax rates often were very high, thus increasing their cost and encouraging smuggling (Fig. 22.8).

**COFFEE**

The Ottoman Empire was primarily responsible for the introduction of coffee to Europe. The Muslim world had been introduced to coffee via original production areas in Yemen (or from an alternative region across the Red Sea to the west in the Horn of Africa). The consumption of coffee was the source of debate in the Muslim world: banned by some and encouraged by others. One description of the arrival and spread of coffee in the urban Muslim world is attributed to Ralph Hattox:

*The central fact in the introduction of coffee into a common urban context, and its spread to other areas of the Muslim world was its adoption by Sufi groups in the larger cities of Yemen. This from all available evidence can be traced to the mid-fifteenth century.* [30]

Coffee arrived in England around 1650. One of the ways that coffee merchants diffused the initial distrust of their product and hot drinks in general was to claim healthful attributes. One such propaganda tract claimed:

*It does the orifices of the stomach good, it fortifi es the heart within, helpeth digestion, quickens the spirits... is good against eyesores, cough, or colds, rhumes, consumption, head ache, dropsy, gout, scurvy, Kings evil and many others.* [31]

Certainly not all consumers would accept such statements, and coffee had its early detractors as well. Coffee, in such tracts, was blamed for many ailments chiefly among them impotence. A consistent thread in coffee statements, however, was coffee’s role as a stimulant, its sleep-preventing attribute, and how it caused consumers to be alert. This consideration of coffee as a stimulant would become important in how coffee was consumed [32].

Coffee was first available in specialized coffee houses. The first coffee house was established in Oxford in 1651 (see Chapters 37 and 43) [33]. Since coffee initially was available only in public settings, and its stimulant nature encouraged conversation, it quickly became viewed as a “social beverage.” John Burnett has written:
From its beginnings coffee-drinking was a social activity, associated with lively dissemination of news, local and national. Coffeehouses therefore attracted men of letters, scholars, poets, wits and men of affairs. [34]

London coffee houses were artistic and commerce centers of the city’s intellectual life. Dignitaries like Christopher Wren and Robert Boyle met at the Oxford coffee house. The use of coffee as a social beverage extended to North America as well. In important cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, coffee houses were as much birthplaces of the Revolution as taverns. Even Williamsburg, Virginia, a town with a small population, had three coffee houses, one located just down the street from the Capitol building. Coffee eventually moved out of the coffee house and began to be consumed in homes of the gentry as well. Coffee drinking in North America received a significant boost from the Revolution, when it was seen as a patriotic alternative to tea.

TEA

Tea came to England from the Far East. It first arrived in tiny quantities brought by travelers, but soon began to be sold in the London coffee houses. Early on tea, like coffee, was given so many virtues that it was perceived more as a drug than as a beverage and, again like coffee, had its supporters and detractors [35]. Early coffee houses sold not only coffee but often tea and chocolate as well. Eventually they also sold beer, wine, and spirits. One of the first advertisements for tea published in London linked its sale with a coffee house:

That excellent and by all Physicians approved, China drink, called by the Chinese, Tcha, by other nations Tay alias Tee, is sold at the Sultaness-head a Cophee-house [sic] in sweetings rents by the royal exchange. [36]

Tea—like coffee—began in the male-dominated world of coffee houses but soon its acceptance and use spread to women. It is reported that a woman, Catherine of Braganza, first introduced tea to the court of Charles the Second. It is said that she brought a chest of tea as part of her dowry with her to England along with the right to trade it in certain Portuguese ports.

Once tea had found a place in and had been accepted by the English King’s court, tea drinking moved slowly down the social ladder to all of England. Since coffee houses were unsuitable venues for respectable women, specialty tea shops—for ladies—were opened. The first of these was founded by Thomas Twining, in Devereux Court, London, in 1717 [37]. Despite the creation of tea houses (and later tea gardens), tea soon became popular as a home-based beverage served by women. This change resulted in the creation of entire industries to make tea equipage, as teapots, teacups, plates, tables, and caddies all became commonplace items in wealthy households. Anne Wilson has described the actions and implications of this change:

The hostess could thus brew and serve tea herself in the presence of her guests, a ceremony which had great appeal. The wives of the nobility and gentry eagerly acquired the newpossessions, and served tea to their friends, who reciprocated. The very costliness of the tea itself gave an extra cachet to the person who offered it at her entertainments . . . a psychological advantage which in due course helped to spread tea drinking further and further down the social scale. [38]

It was probably only the high cost and high tax rates, coupled with the East India Company monopoly, that slowed tea’s rise in England, but even these issues could not stop its growing popularity. The rise in tea consumption was nothing short of astounding. Although accurate figures are difficult to determine, due to a presumed high rate of tea smuggling, but by one estimate in 1701 approximately 100,000 pounds of tea were sold in England; by 1799, the quantity of tea sold had increased to 23 million pounds [39]. By the end of the 18th century tax rates had been lowered to a much more reasonable rate, and political acts basically eliminated tea smuggling. Peter Brown described the situation before that time in the following terms:

Customs and excise were levying higher and higher taxes on these commodities [tea and chocolate] knowing that wholesale smuggling was causing a huge loss in revenue and they kept trying to balance this out by penalizing the legitimate trade. [40]

In addition to smuggling, in the 18th century tea also was subject to adulteration and recycling. Roy Moxham has described these processes in his book, Tea:

The favorite leaves used for adulteration were hawthorn for green teas and sloe for black teas, but birch, ash, and elder were also used. Of course, the leaves of these trees did not make convincing liquor, so it was necessary to add various coloring agents. In addition to the Terra japonica mentioned above, additives included verdigris, ferrous sulphate, Prussian blue, Dutch pink, copper carbonate, and even sheep’s dung. Of these the sheep’s dung was probably the least harmful. . . . Used tea leaves were purchased from servants or from the poor or even as a regular business from the coffeehouses. They were then dried on hotplates and in the case of green teas augmented with copper compounds. [41]

Regardless of purity or price, tea continued to gain in popularity in England. By 1730 tea imports began to surpass those of coffee. By the end of the 18th century tea imports had increased so that tea overtook beer as the most commonly consumed beverage in parts of England. The primary cause for this shift in beverage choice has been described by Anne Wilson:
In 1784 high grain prices were affecting the cost and also the quality of beer, and the duty on tea was at last lowered to a nominal sum based on the grounds that “tea has become an economical substitute to the middle and lower classes of society for malt liquor, the price of which renders it impossible of them to procure the quantity sufficient for them as their only drink.” [42]

This time period then marked the beginning of England’s transition from a primarily fermented alcoholic beverage-consuming country, to one where non-alcoholic beverages dominated. This transition also would be mirrored in North America, but would take longer in the Americas because of continental size and the slower rate of industrialization.

Tea in North America did not have the same success as a beverage as it did in Britain. The primary cause, of course, was politics. Tea was not the only beverage to be affected by the politics of the American Revolution—beer and rum also became viewed as politically improper. But it was tea that was most affected by this perception. Liza Gusler described this phenomenon in her paper, More the Water Bewitched:

Within a century of its introduction, tea was an established symbol of creature comfort in England, but by the late 1760s it was becoming a rallying point for political protest in the American colonies. Tea became the emblem of British oppression forsooth by patriotic associations who gave less than hospitable “tea parties” in Boston and Yorktown for merchants who continued to sell the politically incorrect brew. Coffee and chocolate became the drinks of choice for Americans who opposed tyranny imposed by a distant parliament. [43]

We see this aversive attitude toward tea in the inventory of Peyton Randolph in Williamsburg, Virginia. Randolph died in 1775 and an inventory was taken of his possessions. The inventory lists 40 pounds of coffee, but no tea. Certainly Randolph was wealthy enough to afford tea, but as one of the primary authors of the nonimportation agreements, he would not be “caught dead” with it in his house [44].

CHOCOLATE

Today, chocolate is viewed primarily as a food, but this is because of the invention of milk chocolate during the 19th century. Prior to the invention of processes to remove the fat and blend the cocoa with milk and sugar, culinary uses of chocolate were fairly limited. Anne Wilson, author of Food and Drink in Britain, from the Stone Age to the 19th century, has offered appropriate observations regarding the use of chocolate:

Chocolate Almonds could be purchased from French confectioners in the 1670s, and ... these were soon copied by English housewives. [45] Flavored first with musk and ambergris, and later with orange flower water, the almonds were served as dessert along with crystallized fruits and candies. Chocolate itself flavored other confectionaries, notably chocolate puffs (little light cakes made of sugar and beaten eggs). Chocolate creams were a second course dish. [45]

As seen in the numerous chapters of this book, chocolate originated in the New World and the cacao tree probably originated in the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains in the western Amazon basin [46]. The Olmec civilization was likely the first to use the plant as a beverage. The early Mesoamerican drinks made with cocoa beans bear little resemblance, however, to today’s hot cocoa. Early cacao was unsweetened, thick, spicy, and consumed at room temperature. The Spanish transformed the cacao into chocolate by adding sugar, often vanilla beans, and European spices. The Spanish also began the practice of serving cacao as a hot beverage (see Chapter 8).

Chocolate in an economic sense did not reach England as a viable commodity until after the English captured Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655 [47]. The early consumption of chocolate in England followed a similar pattern to coffee; cacao or chocolate beverages were initially consumed in coffee houses and later specific chocolate houses by wealthy gentlemen, and eventually reached individual households. Once in the house, it commonly moved into the bedroom, where many drank chocolate for its perceived “special” attributes. This use reflected a popular view that chocolate was an aphrodisiac, as summed up by this 17th century poem:

T’ll make old women young and fresh; create new notions of the flesh; And cause them to long for you know what, if they but taste of chocolate. [48]

Chocolate, in time, was taken as a breakfast beverage, sometimes with cold meats and breads. A version of chocolate made from cocoa shells was a favorite breakfast for Martha Washington [49]. In addition to these uses, chocolate also was viewed as a stimulant and as being a wholesome and filling beverage.

During the 18th century, there were three main ways of preparing chocolate as a beverage in England and the North American colonies. These methods were explained by William Salmon in his Dictionary:

That made with water alone (but fortified with a little brandy); that made with milk; and wine chocolate in which the liquid element was supplied by three quarters of a pint of water and half a pint of choice red port or rather choice sherry. [50]

Chocolate was different from the other hot liquors in that the cocoa beans were processed into chocolate bars or tablets, and then grated and prepared...
as a drink. Coffee used the natural beans roasted and then crushed, and tea was simply the dried leaves. Chocolate required more preprocessing before it could be made into a beverage. The processing first involved fermenting the beans after harvest, then roasting the beans, shelling them, grinding them on a hot stone, and sometimes adding spices and sugar during the processing. The chocolate mass—in a semiliquid state—then was poured into molds and allowed to harden. When desired, these bars or “chunks” of chocolate were grated/powdered and mixed with the desired liquid, heated, and finally frothed with a chocolate mill or molinillo.

Crushing cacao beans—on a small scale—was completed using curved chocolate stones, and workers could control how much spices and other ingredients were added (see Chapter 48). When large quantities were required, chocolate was made in mills. Large-scale commercial chocolate operations also were open to the same types of fraud and adulteration associated with tea: one of the most common adulterants added to chocolate was brick dust (see Chapter 47). During most of the Colonial era, most North Americans did not take the time and effort to make their own chocolate and bought pre-made chocolate from commercial chocolate makers.

Chocolate was also considered a luxury by the British government and subject to taxation. The first taxes were on the cocoa beans or nuts as they were called, but merchants evaded these taxes by importing pre-made chocolate bars. To counter this practice, the English government changed the law and this loophole was removed. In addition, the English also regulated the production of chocolate by British tradesmen and restricted the import of chocolate manufactured in North America, with the result that chocolate remained relatively expensive and less available in England, compared to North America [51].

In North America, chocolate was easy to obtain, either legitimately or as smuggled goods. With the exception of some small production in English colonies in the Caribbean, the majority of the cocoa coming to North American ports originated in non-English colonies. Cacao beans were sent to major seaport cities in the Northeast, where they were converted into chocolate. The primary chocolate producing cities in colonial America were Boston, Newport, New York, and Philadelphia. Chocolate was manufactured in mills (both large and small), that also ground products as diverse as ginger, mustard, snuff, and wheat. Millers needed a variety of products to prepare since chocolate-making was seasonal and quantities were not manufactured during the hot weather of summer. Chocolate-making also required considerable quantities of unskilled labor to participate in the processing of cacao beans (i.e., shelling and grinding). Often slaves were employed in these tasks in North America [52].

Comparative Prices of Hot Liquors

Comparing prices of the hot liquors is more difficult than for fermented liquors. This is because tea leaves can be reused, whereas chocolate and coffee prepared from beans are one-time-use beverages. The situation is further complicated by taxes imposed at different times in North American history, and the ever-existing problem of inflation through the decades. The law of supply and demand also affected prices as production increased. Still, one may make comparisons by examining the rates charged by different coffee houses, keeping in mind that buying these drinks in coffee houses would be considerably more expensive than preparing the beverages at home.

There is an account from York, England, dated to 1733, where Anne Wilson (Proprietor) sold coffee at 12 pence a pot; tea at 18 pence a pot; and chocolate at 3 pence a dish. The prices in York, however, were high since in Oxford the price of a pot of coffee was 4 pence [53]. Prices varied throughout the middle part of the 18th century and rose quickly, especially during times of war. The Commutation Act of 1784 reduced the taxes on tea and the other hot liquors to 12.5 percent, lowering prices of these products significantly as well as reducing the black market. Chocolate at this time sold for up to 5 shillings 6 pence a pound; after the Act it sold for between 2 shillings 3 pence a pound and 4 shillings a pound for the finest type [54]. In Williamsburg, Virginia, chocolate sold for 2 shillings 6 pence per pound, while coffee prices were 1 shilling 6 pence a pound, with tea fluctuating between 12 and 15 shillings a pound depending on the quality [55].

Conclusion

During the 18th century in England and her colonies, the availability and use of different beverages were in transition. The traditional fermented beverages faced competition from distilled spirits and the hot liquors. Attitudes toward consuming alcohol on a daily basis started to transform because of changing medical opinion, political factors, and religious zeal. The Industrial Revolution also changed public attitudes toward drinking. The use of machinery in factories helped to encourage a transition away from alcoholic drinks toward other types. Other social factors that influenced attitudes away from alcohol and towards non-alcoholic beverages—and in some instances encouraged cacao/chocolate drinking—included the religious fervor brought by the Great Awakening and the rise of the Temperance Movement in both England and North America. A transition away from alcohol was taking place in North America—linked to the rapid rise in popularity of hot liquors—and it was in this time period that North Americans commonly turned their attention to chocolate.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jim Gay, whose enthusiasm for chocolate is contagious. I would also like to thank Master Foods U.S.A., a division of Mars Company, particularly Deborah and Forest Mars, for their support and their company. Eric and Judy Whittacre, and Rodney Snyder taught me about the world of chocolate and lighted my passion for this wonderful beverage/food. I also wish to thank the staff at Colonial Williamsburg who have helped and supported this project during the course of my work on chocolate and other Colonial era beverages.

Endnotes

1. The preference for serving drinks very cold or with ice is a relatively new one that began to take root in the United States after World War II.
2. This is in reference to the humoral food/medical system that predated the concept of germ theory.
3. Numerous reviews of human genetic differences in the ability to digest fresh milk have appeared during the past 35 years.
4. Indeed, the first recipe for using chocolate that the chocolate history research group has found for North America was for chocolate almonds.

References

10. Microfilm, Reel 1 #00035, Alexandria Public Library, special collections.
47. Wilson, A. C. *Food and Drink in Britain, from the Stone Age to the 19th Century*. Chicago, IL: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1973; p. 408.