

The English perception of chocolate: from invigorating remedy to exotic indulgence, c. 1660 – 1760

EMMA VICKERS

Chocolate arrived in England for the first time in the middle of the seventeenth century. Though marketed initially as a medical panacea, it was soon enjoyed as a sweet-tasting extravagance. In his treatise, The Indian Nectar (1662), Henry Stubbe promotes chocolate's curative and stimulating properties.¹ In contrast, R. Brunsden's trade card (c. 1750-1760) advertises chocolate alongside other high-quality groceries. Together, these objects reflect the trajectory of chocolate as it moved from the medical into the commercial domain, and from the extraordinary to the familiar. Despite these developments, chocolate retained its exotic associations and remained linked to sophisticated and cultured taste. It is this paradox, the increased adoption of chocolate by ever-larger numbers coupled with its powerful connotations of exclusivity, that is explored through these two artefacts.

Treatises, trade cards, broadsheet advertisements, and recipes reveal much about the availability, perception and popularity of chocolate during its first century in England. In 1585 Spanish *conquistadors* transported the first shipment of cacao beans from Central America into Europe. From Spain, this tropical product proceeded through Italy and France, gaining popularity both at court and with clerics who consumed chocolate drinks while fasting. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this 'Roman Catholic' drink was viewed suspiciously by the English when it first appeared during the interregnum in the early 1650s. Nevertheless, once Cromwell's forces had captured Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655, the English capitalised on their cacao plantations, resulting in a reliable supply of cacao beans to these shores. The first known advertisement for this 'Excellent West Indian Drink' appeared in 1657, available at Queen's Head Alley, Bishopsgate.² In June 1659, another advertisement promoted 'ready to drink' chocolate, 'unmade at easie [*sic*] rates [which could] cure and preserve the body of many diseases'.³ Therefore, within a decade of its initial appearance, these advertisements demonstrate that chocolate was starting to become a well-recognised exotic drink, identified with medicinal properties, and one that was already being enjoyed both publicly and privately. The English appreciation of chocolate had commenced.

¹ Henry Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar, or a Discourse Concerning Chocolata: Wherein the Nature of Cacao-nut, and the other Ingredients of that Composition, is examined and stated according to the Judgment and Experience of the Indians, and Spanish Writers, who lived in the Indies and others; with sundry additional Observations made in England: The Ways of Compounding and Preparing Chocolata are enquired into; its Effects as to its alimential and Venereal quality, as well as Medicinal (especially in Hypochondriacal Melancholy) are fully debated. Together with a Spagyricall Analysis of the Cacao-nut, performed by that excellent Chymist, Monsieur le Febure, Chymist to His Majesty* (London: Printed by J.C. for Andrew Crook at the Sign of the Green Dragon in St Paul's Churchyard, 1662).

² *The Publick Advertiser*, no.5, 16-22 June 1657.

³ Cited in Sophie D. and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), p. 169.

Chocolate was first sold in coffee houses, then also in more exclusive chocolate houses (mostly huddled around St James's), before it began to be consumed in ever-larger volumes. It could increasingly be bought in slabs or lozenges in shops, to be incorporated into dishes and drinks in the home. Cookery books featuring chocolate recipes became more commonplace from the 1660s onwards, often aimed at the 'middling sorts' and gentry.⁴ These recipes, along with specialised chocolate utensils and crockery, (including wooden molinillos and cups with mancerina), reveal that chocolate was enjoyed domestically from early on, both as a flavouring and as a beverage.⁵ The transition from medicinal to culinary use meant different forms of marketing were required: treatises could explain the properties and effects of chocolate to the uninitiated, while trade cards could promote chocolate to sophisticated households. What is useful to consider first, however, is how the usage of chocolate changed over this period and whether this affected its elitist connotations. The two objects selected to illuminate this are Henry Stubbe's treatise *The Indian Nectar* (Fig.1) and R. Brunsden's trade card (Fig.2).

In many ways, chocolate's popularity was far from assured, as is evident from the 'hard selling' techniques adopted in treatises of the period. Oily, syrupy and bitter, chocolate would have tasted alien to English palates. Less appetising still, the Aztecs, from whom it was adopted, served it cold, spiced with chilli peppers and occasionally blood, so the Italian merchant Girolamo Benzoni was not alone in believing it was 'more suited for pigs than for men'.⁶ Chocolate's negative association with popery also meant a favourable English reception was unlikely, especially when combined with apprehension about its stimulating side-effects. Even warming the chocolate seemed peculiar to the English, being wholly unaccustomed to hot drinks.⁷ Therefore, in order to persuade the English to consume chocolate, it needed to be bestowed explicitly with significant health benefits. From 1650-1700 a wealth of treatises and pamphlets extolling the wonders of this 'drug' therefore emerged, though *The Indian Nectar* is probably the most exhaustive English account of chocolate of the period. Taken as a whole, seventeenth-century treatises reflect the heated contemporary debate surrounding chocolate – its perceived benefits as much as its imagined dangers.⁸ The very publication of these treatises illustrates the need to enlighten an unknowing populace about this peculiar substance.

⁴ Chocolate became an increasingly regular ingredient in cakes and baked dishes. Chocolate recipes often included the addition of sweet ingredients, including rosewater and jasmine, and sugar was fairly standard.

⁵ Molinillos were whisks to stir the chocolate. A mancerina would hold the chocolate cup in place on the saucer and was particularly used to prevent spillage on bedsheets.

⁶ Girolamo Benzoni, *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* (1565), cited in Daniela Bleichmar, *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Culture from Columbus to Darwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017) p. 60.

⁷ Chocolate, tea and coffee all arrived in England within a few years of each other.

⁸ Other treatises that positively promoted chocolate include Thomas Gage's *The English American* (1648), William Hughes's *The American Physician* (1672), and John Chamberlayne's *The Natural History of Coffee, Thee, Chocolate, Tobacco in Four Several Sections* (1682). However, Daniel Duncan's *Wholesome Advice against the Abuse of Hot Liquors, Particularly of Coffee, Chocolate, Tea, Brandy and Strong-Waters* (1706), and Martin Lister's *A Journey to Paris in the Year 1698* (1699) both challenged the bolder claims made of chocolate.

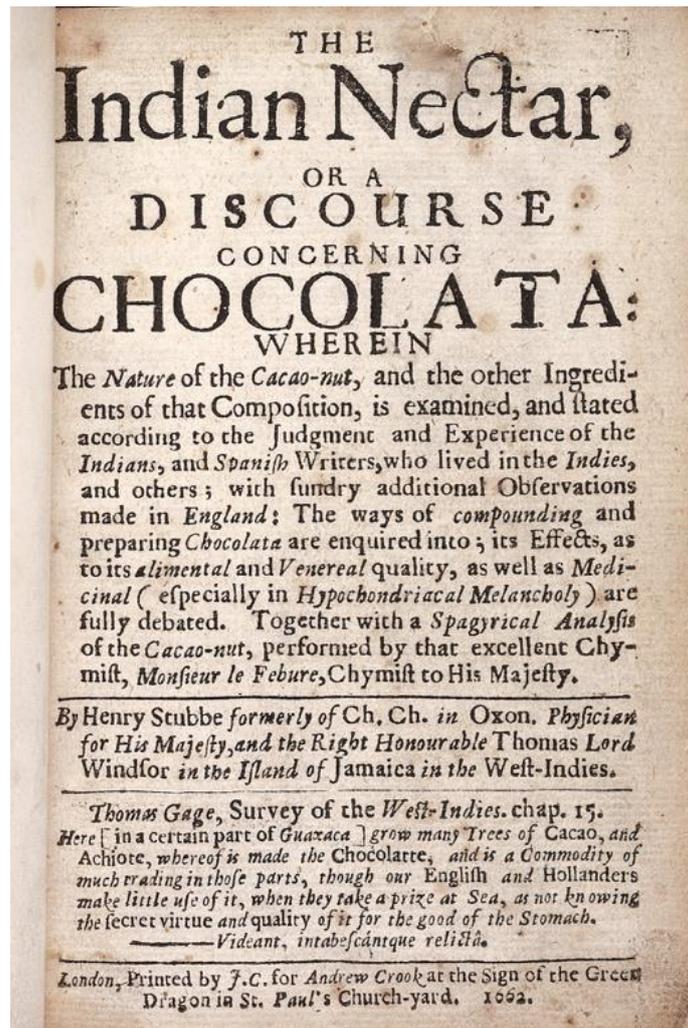


Figure 1: Henry Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar* ... (1662), title page of book, (Credit: Wellcome Collection, London. Attribution 4.0 International CC BY 4.0)

The popularity of chocolate as a medical product in this period owes much to the particular context into which it was introduced. Awash with disease and infection, the mid-seventeenth century English population suffered from all manner of conditions, ranging from dysentery and dropsy to scrofula and smallpox or, as Wadsworth translates it, ‘a plague of the guts, fluxes, consumptions [and] cough of the lungs’.⁹ In this environment, any ‘drug’ promising respite from relentless ill-health was worth sampling. *The Indian Nectar* has a multi-stranded structure, in which Stubbe primarily describes chocolate’s medicinal benefits, as well as its nutritional value, assorted methods of preparation and the differences between Spanish and English chocolate recipes. Medically, Stubbe suggests that chocolate is a catholicon, stating

⁹ Colmenero’s seminal treatise on chocolate was translated into English by James Wadsworth in 1652. Colmenero de Ledesma, Antonio *Chocolate: Or an Indian Drinke by the Wise and Moderate Use whereof, Health is Preserved, Sickness Diverted, and Cured, Especially the Plague of the Guts; Vulgarly Called the New Disease; Fluxes, Consumptions, and Coughs of the Lungs, with Sundry Other Desperate Diseases. By it Also Conception is Caused, the Birth Hastened and Facilitated, beauty Gain’d and Continued*, trans. by James Wadsworth, (London: Printed for John Dakins, dwelling neare the Vine Taverne in Holborne, 1652).

that 'I have heard and read Discourses of Panaceas and Universal Medicines: and truly I think Chocolata may as justly at least pretend to that Title, as any'.¹⁰ Elucidating further, Stubbe maintains that there are particular ingredients that can be added to chocolate to cure different ailments, dependent upon circumstances. For example, in 'cold constitutions', cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves are considered ideal additions; for 'hot consumptive tempers' almonds and 'pistachos' are recommended; vanilla meanwhile strengthened the heart, and saffron boosted the stomach. For other disorders, Stubbe recommends chocolate concoctions containing 'Musk', 'Ambergrease',¹¹ 'Citron', 'Lemon-peels', and 'Odoriferous Aromatick Oyls'. He portrays these 'new exotics' as 'legitimate additions to the *materia medica* of orthodox physicians'.¹² Perhaps more credibly than some of his wilder assertions, (given that it is now known that serotonin and phenylethylamine are both mood-enhancing, and theobromine is a muscle relaxant and cardiac stimulant), Stubbe also claims chocolate obstructs the 'hypochondriac melancholy'.¹³ By highlighting its comprehensive range of curative powers, he indicates that everyone has something to gain from this wonder-drug.

Stubbe also encourages widespread consumption by demystifying chocolate's effects. He addresses fears about chocolate's stimulating properties directly, by depicting it as a positive aid to fertility and sex. Stubbe promotes its efficacy as an aphrodisiac, claiming that 'Chocolata [...] becomes provocative to lust'.¹⁴ He even includes a biblical reference to Rachel, Jacob's second wife, whom he claims would not have needed to purchase mandrake roots had she known of chocolate's ability to stimulate sexual desire. Here he directs his observations particularly at 'London Gentlemen', encouraging them to sample chocolate rather than experimenting with other aphrodisiacs on the market (such as anchovies).

Having established that chocolate is a near-universal remedy, Stubbe also asserts that it is not only a drink but a complete food in itself, thereby increasing its desirability still further. In fact, he criticises Pope Urban VIII who 'did declare it in discourse [...] that it was merely a drink [...] yet few believe him infallible'.¹⁵ The cacao nut, Stubbe continues, has the greatest nourishment as all other ingredients are 'but Spicery [...] and serve at best but as a Vehicle to distribute the Cacao nut into the body, and to make it agreeable to the Stomach'.¹⁶ Stubbe endorses it as a naturally wholesome food by claiming that 'English soldiers stationed in [...] Jamaica lived [exclusively] on cacao nut paste with sugar'.¹⁷ To further highlight this point,

¹⁰ Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar*, p. 125.

¹¹ Ambergis is produced in the digestive systems of sperm whales.

¹² Brian Cowan, 'New Worlds, New tastes: Food Fashions after the Renaissance', in *Food: The History of Taste*, ed. by Paul Freedman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007). p. 217.

¹³ Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar*, p. 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

he cites Dr Juanes de Barrios, who claimed that ‘after eating chocolate, one needed no meat, bread or drink.’¹⁸ Stubbe insists that chocolate, if taken twice a day, can refresh anyone who is ‘tyred [*sic*] through business’.¹⁹ Rather than appearing overly extravagant in his claims for chocolate, Stubbe helps increase its overall popularity. At the very least, he suggests, it is energy-rich food.

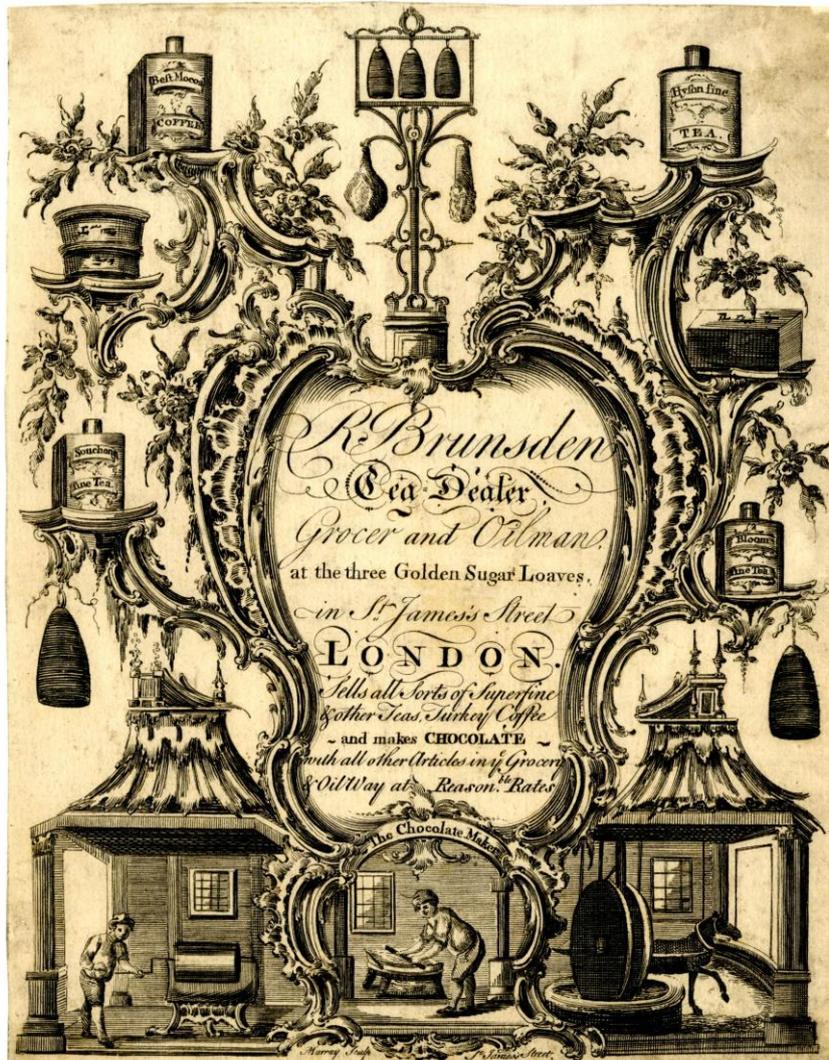


Figure 2: Murray of London, R. Brunsden's Trade Card (c.1750-60), ink on paper, 19.3 × 15.4 cm (Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum)

Attributed to a later date (c. 1750), R. Brunsden's trade card (Fig.2) also promotes chocolate, but in a distinctively different way. Chocolate had become familiar to the English by 1750, and so Brunsden's intention here is to advertise it as enticingly exotic fare, rather than as a 'new' product imbued with specific

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

health properties. Essentially, this trade card is a commercial advertisement, but its design also reveals both the elaborate process behind chocolate's manufacture as well as the apparent sophistication of chocolate consumers. This richly decorated cartouche is adorned with goods for sale, offering a concentrated yet alluring image. Brunsden's sign, engraved at the top of the card, is three golden sugar loaves. As the most common symbol chosen by grocers and tea men, contemporaries (including the illiterate) would have identified his business immediately. In this way, the image acts as another form of text. Under the title of 'The Chocolate Maker', three vignettes portray men preparing chocolate: roasting chocolate beans, cracking open their shells to extract the cocoa nibs, and grinding these nibs using a horse-powered mill. As with the precise additives itemised in Stubbe's treatise, the effort involved in preparing chocolate suggests it is a superior and complex product, deserving of appreciation.

When compared, these two sources reveal that the typical usage of chocolate changed over this period: from revitalising remedy to sweet treat. However, increasing both accessibility to, and appreciation of, chocolate did not mean that its connotations of elitism and exoticism were in any way diluted. Even the earlier source, Stubbe's treatise, reveals that there was always a sense of decorum associated with chocolate drinking. Though the medicinal benefits of chocolate are central to his treatise, it is also notable that he details the appropriate methods for the English to adopt when preparing and consuming chocolate. By doing so, he infers that chocolate-consumption is associated with social prestige, acquiring its own etiquette from early on. Here is the central paradox of chocolate consumption throughout this period: though a wealth of evidence suggests it was becoming an increasingly commercial and mainstream product, its social *cachet* remained a powerful marketing tool and was fundamental to the way in which the English perceived it.

The expansion of the British Empire and the rise in print culture resulted in increasingly worldly consumers throughout the eighteenth century. Trade cards such as Brunsden's were designed to appeal to their sense of refinement, particularly when promoting foreign products such as chocolate. Added to this, favourable economic conditions in the early eighteenth century meant prices fell as pay rose in real terms, so more disposable income was available for such exotic purchases.²⁰ As chocolate became more reasonably priced, entirely new groups of consumers emerged. For the rising 'middling sorts', and even some artisans, conspicuous consumption was a way to emulate the social elite and to demonstrate their own cultivation. In fact, evidence from Anne E.C. McCants' 'Poor Consumers' reveals that consumption

²⁰ Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 68.

of chocolate had spread well beyond the ‘middling sorts’ by 1750, even being devoured by humble tailors.²¹ Chocolate was being democratised. Sidney Mintz cites Austen and Smith who also note the growing chocolate consumption among the less affluent.²² They argue that respectability was their *primum mobile*, and this trade card would have appealed to them for this very reason. Brunsden’s message is that consuming chocolate demonstrates one’s gentility, elegance and worldliness. Clearly, the opportunity to enjoy chocolate was now open to all, or at least to anyone who could manage these ‘reasonable’ rates. Though chocolate is still not an essential commodity, Brunsden’s trade card demonstrates that it could be readily purchased - at least in London - from a local grocer. It can now legitimately be described as a mainstream luxury, but it is no longer the extortionate one that Stubbe identifies costing six shillings sixpence per pound.²³

A more detailed analysis of the author of *The Indian Nectar*, and some of his blatant references to distinguished figures, reveal Stubbe’s desire to promote chocolate’s *kudos* from the start. Stubbe (1632-1676) was a scholar and second keeper at the Bodleian from 1657-1659, as well as physician to Charles II and to Lord Windsor, Governor of Jamaica. He gives authority to his treatise by quoting directly from the pre-existing European literature on chocolate, particularly by Antonio Colmenero who ‘authenticated’ his work.²⁴ By referring liberally to eminent physicians of the day, including Robert Boyle and William Harvey, Stubbe adds further weight to his medical pronouncements. Giving the ultimate social authority to his arguments, he also draws attention to his chocolate-making for the newly-enthroned king.²⁵ The significance of this royal connection is emphasised in the introduction: ‘Besides the king’s majesty; who alone is so great a promoter and so competent a judg [*sic*] of merit, that to an Ingenuous Person, there needs no further inducement to deserve’.²⁶ Stubbe unequivocally highlights the social prestige associated with chocolate through this royal reference. *The Indian Nectar* can also be viewed as a self-serving piece of propaganda. In writing this treatise from a primarily medical stance, Stubbe stood to gain professionally by promoting himself as the ultimate expert on this universal medicine. He also expected to benefit financially, foreseeing cacao’s potential as a lucrative crop. Personal anecdotes add further credibility to Stubbe’s empirical approach. For example, he claims that chocolate is ‘observed to be more laxative then [*sic*] binding and [...] neither Mr Boyle nor myself (who did eat two pound once, and great quantities on purpose), ever felt any heaviness, or annoyance in the stomach or elsewhere’.²⁷ Stubbe’s personal familiarity

²¹ Anne E.C. McCants, Poor Consumers as Global Consumers: The Diffusion of Tea and Coffee Drinking in the 18th Century, *Economic History Review*, 61 (2000), 181-189.

²² Sidney Mintz, ‘The Changing Roles of Food in the Study of Consumption.’ *Consumption and the World of Goods*. ed. by John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 266.

²³ Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar*, Preface p. A7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵ Charles II reigned from 1660-1685.

²⁶ Stubbe, *The Indian Nectar*, Introduction p. A2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

with chocolate and his knowledge of pre-existing literature on the subject, buoyed by his influential social and medical connections, meant he was able to establish himself as England's definitive chocolate specialist.

As has been noted above, chocolate became an increasing feature of the English diet from the late seventeenth century and was now enjoyed by a greater stratum of society. However, the underlying association with decorum remained, as is evident in Brunsden's trade card. Much more than an *aide-mémoire*, trade cards communicated the nature, provenance and quality of goods.²⁸ As Maxine Berg explains, their purpose was two-fold: 'to encourage the consumer to return, and to act as a means of encouraging the dissemination of knowledge about a business from existing to potential customers'.²⁹ Brunsden's trade card epitomises many from the period 1720-1770, in that it combines ornate imagery and text in order to tempt consumers. Through the quality of design and the products being sold (including freshly prepared chocolate), Brunsden demonstrates that he is a respectable grocer selling first-rate goods. Trade cards were expensive to produce, in this case designed and engraved by Murray of London, and his high-quality card reflects his fine products. Brunsden, profiting from the ongoing culinary transformation in the domestic sphere, is selling chocolate as a luxuriously exotic product, to consumers cultured enough to recognise it as such.

The enduring sophistication of chocolate is evident in this trade-card's design. By including the detailed vignettes of the chocolate-making process, Brunsden is keen to show his chocolate is produced on site by professionals: these images are intended to imply freshness and act as a guarantee of high standards – particularly important as eighteenth century chocolate was frequently adulterated by the addition of grain. In fact, chocolate makers such as these would have sharpened their skills considerably since 1723, when imports of fully manufactured chocolate were banned, in order to generate a chocolate-making industry in England. By emphasising the expertise required to make chocolate, Brunsden highlights its remarkability. Furthermore, as Ambrose Heal explains, the trade card as a whole is exquisite, with 'the lettering [...] almost uniformly of a high standard of achievement; the design [...] dignified and well-spaced, the ornament well-drawn and the copper-plate engraving [...] highly accomplished'.³⁰ Through the adoption of a rococo design, exemplified by deliberately eye-catching, asymmetric scroll frames, trade cards of the 1750s constructed an aura of European *savoir faire*. Here, foreignness implies cultivated taste. As Linda Colley states, acquiring what was foreign was one of the ways in which to proclaim one's social,

²⁸ Jon Stobart, *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England 1650-1830* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 167.

²⁹ Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, 'Selling Consumption in the Eighteenth Century: Advertising and the Trade Card in Britain and France.' *Cultural and Social History* 4 (2) (2007) p. 151.

³⁰ Ambrose Heal, *London Tradesmen's Cards of the XVIII Century: An Account of their Origin and Use*, p. 4.

cultural and economic superiority at home.³¹ This rococo style, with its emphasis on ‘intimacy, elegance, [...] and style’ was perfect for trade cards which were, by their very nature, small-scale yet distinguished.³² The script, too, enhances the decorous appeal of the image. The combination of different fonts, as well as the blending of upper- and lower-case lettering, adds to the captivating design. Due to the limited space, the written content of the card is necessarily informative: the name and location of the grocer, and the range and quality of his products, are identified. Here, chocolate is sold very much alongside other global goods such as tea and coffee, as well as the numerous other products sold by an oilman.³³ Despite selling ordinary items, Brunsdon is appealing particularly to customers who will appreciate the fine quality of his more flamboyant goods.

Not only is the *quality* of products identified but the *range* of exotic goods on sale is also revealed in Brunsdon’s card. By highlighting particular items, it appears that his leading lines were chocolate, tea from China and Turkish coffee. These sought-after consumables are chosen as representative of the quality of his cosmopolitan establishment. Sourced globally, the provenance of the commodities is a vital part of his message, making the shopping experience more exciting for the customer.³⁴ Through the creation of such a visually seductive card, Brunsdon has essentially ‘invited the buyer into a conversation’.³⁵ By purchasing, and thereby engaging with, these imported goods, the English consumer is personally participating in this era of rapid imperial expansion. Essentially, Empire is being ‘deployed as a marketing device’ here.³⁶ This trade card successfully links the foreign with domestic, the cosmopolitan with home-made, with chocolate retaining its sophisticated and superior aura throughout.

So, as the Empire extended its tentacles, a range of novel foods - including chocolate - reached English shores. Initially suspicious, the English needed to be coaxed into sampling chocolate. Once their curiosity had got the better of them, the taste of chocolate - sweetened with sugar (and much else besides) - was naturally appealing. It was even more the case if consumers believed that it could either eradicate their medical woes, or reflect their cultured taste and procure them elevated social status. Chocolate was, therefore, perceived differently at different times, and both Stubbe’s treatise and Brunsdon’s trade card reflect the very distinct decades in which they were produced. It is evident from these artefacts that chocolate was successfully adapted and marketed by men like Stubbe and Brunsdon, depending upon the requirements, tastes and desires of the English at the time. Indisputably, chocolate seeped into English

³¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 169.

³² Michael Snodin, ‘Trade Cards and English Rococo’ in *The Rococo in England: A Symposium held at the V&A 17-19 May 1984* (London: V&A Museum, 1984), p. 27.

³³ Oilmen sold everything from cinnamon and hair powder to glue and gunpowder.

³⁴ Berg and Clifford, 4 (2) (2007) p. 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.156.

³⁶ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England* p.182 footnote 17.

society from 1660s onwards, becoming an ever-more recognisable and popular product. Whether sold by apothecaries as a legitimate medicine, opportunists as a miraculous panacea, chocolate-house owners as a sociable drink or grocers as a culinary ingredient, it was increasingly purchased by everyone from royalty to soap-boilers. Yet, throughout this process of anglicisation and democratisation, chocolate's exotic and exclusive associations endured.

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