Baker's Chocolate: The Making of a Name

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During his fourth voyage on July 30, 1502, Christopher Columbus intercepted a trading canoe laden with cocoa at Bonacca Island off Honduras. He discovered that the Indians used the cocoa as a currency, basing its value on the mildly narcotic effects of chocolate. No European had ever seen cocoa before or knew its pleasures. Thus, this "food of the gods," *theobroma cacao*, was thrown into the biological exchange between the Old and New Worlds as a consequence of Columbus' last, least successful "High Voyage."¹ For a century and a half after Columbus, Spain and Portugal monopolized what overseas trade there was in cocoa. With England's capture of Jamaica in 1655, the British took possession of their first cocoa plantations. Just two years later, London's first chocolate house opened on Bishopsgate Street, where gentlemen met to drink and swagger. As with tea and brandy, people drank chocolate for reasons other than nutrition. New social customs dictated that chocolate be drunk in a "right" fashion by those who could. Graceful porcelain chocolate cups clinked in social delight from London to Vienna.²

With a market of Englishmen already anxious for as much chocolate as they could get, and colonials desirous of imitating their style, a potentially enormous market for American-made chocolate existed. Chocolate manufacturing, distinct from the cocoa trade, began in North America in 1765, one year after passage of the Sugar Act coincidentally allowed cocoa beans into the colonies. In a building on the Neponset River in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Dr. James Baker, a physician, and John Hannon, an Irish chocolate maker, set up the first chocolate mill in what would become the United States. Baker took over the business when Hannon died in 1780, changing the name from "Hannon's" to "Baker's." From the time of the Constitution and the California Gold Rush, Lincoln's first inaugural and the Centennial celebration, the beginnings of automobile travel and space flight, "Baker's Chocolate" spanned the entire course of the nation's history.³

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Between 1768 and 1772, foreign chocolate exports from the Baker mill and from several others amounted to about three thousand pounds annually. Coastal exports were thirty times that figure. After the Revolution, chocolate exports from the United States gradually advanced to forty-seven thousand pounds annually in the 1790s. Americans continued to consume the bulk of production themselves, but exports went to Europe, Africa, and even China during the first halcyon years of the republic.\(^4\) In 1813, James Baker's son and successor Edmund made two important improvements in the business. First, he replaced an 1806 structure with another mill. The new stone building, forty feet square and three stories high, contained mills for chocolate and wool, with a small adjacent cornmill. Secondly, Edmund Baker took on his son Walter (1792-1852) as an apprentice. It was during Walter Baker's career that "Baker's Chocolate" achieved national recognition. In 1823, he was completely running the business, and chocolate making was its sole function. Walter Baker was an advertising pioneer, with all attending virtues and faults. His ability to identify his name with a product, attract public demand, and sustain production to meet that demand was the basis of the longest running advertising success in the American food industry.\(^5\)

From Walter Baker & Co., *Cocoa and Chocolate... A Short History of their production and use* (Boston, 1910), pg. 45.
Buying the right kind of cocoa beans was the first factor in Baker’s ability to make a good product. Once or twice a year, he went to Salem, Massachusetts to buy beans from the West Indian merchants. To prepare for the busy winter season, he made the largest purchases in the summer. Since the cocoa tree bore fruit continuously, Baker could buy smaller lots throughout the year. Generally, he wouldn’t buy any stock without seeing it first, so cocoa merchants often had to mail him samples of beans. He advised his most trusted agents, however — Grant and Stone in New York City, and Hussey and MacKay in Philadelphia — how to judge and buy beans. The grower’s care in bean fermentation and drying was most important to quality, so agents had to judge a few beans in each hogshead, tierce, or barrel for texture, color, size, smell, and taste. Baker and his agents bought the finest beans for Baker’s best chocolate, and lower priced beans for the medium grades. They were not above buying old, moldy, and decayed beans for his cheap grades.6

Baker left few clues in his business records as to how he made chocolate. But he clearly manufactured it from varied lots of beans, and “in the best manner,” to use his words. To protect his methods, a deaf-mute woman managed the research area, which he called “the secret room.”7 Because he guarded the process so carefully, one can only speculate what happened. Likely he used the basic steps that chocolate makers use today. First, as different kinds of beans roasted best under different temperatures, workers had to carefully control oven temperatures. Roasting reduced bean bitterness and intensified flavor. Workers then sieved the shells from the beans, and ground them into a chocolate paste. Typical granite corn stones also ground chocolate. As the paste was high in butterfat, Baker had to press out about two-thirds of it. French chocolate makers had used presses in the eighteenth century, and Van Houten of Holland patented an improved one in 1828. Pressing would only have made a better product, as chocolate low in butterfat was more soluble, digestible, better tasting, and easier to mold into shape.8

While roasting and grinding beans had their fine points, it was the inability to run his mill continually throughout the year that limited Baker’s production. As the mill needed water for power, he had to slow or stop milling when it ran low. Lack of water in the autumn, at the beginning of milling season, caused the most damage. Low water posed no problem in the summer however, as the mill did not operate in hot months. It shut down in warm temperatures because chocolate made then would only turn speckled and distorted. Chocolate that Baker made in cool temperatures, on the other hand, had a fine, glossy look that buyers prized. Generally, chocolate making began in late October and continued until the late spring months. The busiest times were from late November to April.9

Other problems inherent in the manufacturing process injured the appearance of chocolate. Baker’s inferior grades, for instance, often contained small holes from burst bubbles. Although these formed naturally when chocolate cooled, Baker thought that they resembled worm holes. Another manufacturing problem was that everyone who handled beans had to do so with
some care. Beans broke easily, and as they were then likely to burn during roasting, they infected the whole batch of chocolate with a bad flavor. Because of this, controlling the taste of chocolate was somewhat of a hit or miss process. In addition, spoiled cocoa did not always appear so, and by accident Baker sometimes made it into chocolate. Transporting chocolate to market posed more problems. Salt water gave it a green mold, steamboat boilers and sun melted it, worms ate it, and wagon movement broke it. Generally, Baker took no responsibility for this sort of damage.

All food manufacturers, of course, had problems in processing, preserving, and shipping their goods. The peculiarity of chocolate was that it easily perished in its merchantable form. Other foods deteriorated in their content: butter went rancid, flour fermented, meat rotted. Only ice and chocolate lost value by melting shapeless. Otherwise, chocolate tasted fine. Food manufacturers either figured out some way of preserving their products, or they did not ship beyond the limits of perishability. Baker, though, would ship anywhere. In 1826, he looked for an outlet in Halifax, Nova Scotia. His Boston agent had some chocolate there, and Baker immediately wrote to a Halifax contact asking if “an agency ... might be established there, perhaps to my advantage...?” He also asked how to go about selling in Quebec and Montreal.

Obviously, cool northern markets were less risky, while the water routes inland and to California threatened the greatest time and temperature factors. But if fellow Bostonian Frederic Tudor could sell ice to the West Indies, then Baker could sell anywhere he wanted. In 1826, Baker gambled the most by sending a shipment up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to Cincinnati. In 1827, he tried to sell in steamy New Orleans. He wrote to a prospective agent there that “almost all the chocolate sold in your market is very inferior, and it is an object with me to get the Baker brand introduced there... I believe its superiority will insure it a ready sale.” Since he could sell in Cincinnati and New Orleans, anywhere else along the way was in his grasp. He wrote to Roberts and Clifford in Norfolk, Virginia, and to Daniel Hale in Charleston that “I can ship you annually as much as you can vend.” Baker also expanded west. He instructed agents in Baltimore and elsewhere to sell to western grocers. Baker advised his agents to only sell chocolate to new grocers who agreed ultimately to buy two hundred pounds more. Furthermore, knowing that it was cheaper to reprocess chocolate than to buy new beans, Baker advised agents to return stock they couldn't sell.

Given all the obstacles to making and selling a good piece of chocolate, consumers understandably had frequent complaints. Baker told agents to explain that spoiled cocoa sometimes slipped through the manufacturing process, but personally he thought that cooks ruined their own chocolate. “If frequently happens,” he wrote in 1824, “that a chocolate consumer will hire a new cook who knows not how to boil the article, or a pump or well gets out of order and changes the taste of the water or an injury to copper culinary vessels will vary the taste of good chocolate.” He thought that personal tastes for
chocolate varied, and complained that "in all these and other cases the manufacturer alone is censured." While consumer complaints were ever present, Baker's carefully orchestrated advertising campaign steadily increased sales. As early as 1827, he instructed his Philadelphia agent to find out about advertising in newspapers there — once every week, throughout the year. In 1854, thirty newspapers across the country carried frequent advertisements for Baker's chocolate. In establishing national brand identity in this manner, Baker assured that the public would readily associate their desire for chocolate with the Baker name.

Building on the seventeenth and eighteenth century beliefs that chocolate was nourishing and medicinal, Baker's advertisements stressed its curative qualities. Nineteenth century medical authorities supported them, going so far in 1850 as to claim in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal that Baker's Broma, "an admirable preparation," should always be on hand in "hospitals, infirmaries, and households generally." This reputation was not based entirely on myth, however, as chocolate does have physiological effects. It contains theobromine, a nerve stimulant and diuretic, along with caffeine, a muscle and nerve stimulant.

To further condition the public to equate good chocolate with his brand name, Baker always warranted it with a money back guarantee. Under the warranty, agents supposedly accepted chocolate from any disappointed customer. There is no evidence in any of the Baker financial papers, however, that he did pay back any money. This is not surprising though, because he told agents that some dissatisfied purchasers only pretended that something was wrong. If buyers had no "just" complaints, Baker wrote to his Philadelphia agent in 1824, they must explain that fault did not lie with the manufacturer. Furthermore, many people bought Baker's chocolate to resell, and they refused to honor the warranty. The guarantee, therefore, was a good advertising gimmick, but — for the consumer — generally a sham. Baker justified the decision not to honor the warranty because, as he wrote in that same letter, "I know that I never offer any chocolate for sale of the Baker brand that is not manufactured of the best stock in the best manner...".

Between 1820 and 1850, Baker sold products at a variety of prices so that most everyone could buy one kind or another of his brand. In the 1820s, he stocked at least five different kinds of cocoa beans from which he made "Baker's" chocolate, and a low grade, low priced chocolate that sold under the name of "Lapham's." People generally drank these products by grating and mixing them with hot milk or water. By 1824, he manufactured two other kinds of chocolate, "Baker's No. 2," and "Baker's No. 3." He wrote in 1826 that "Baker's No. 1," which he made primarily for urban buyers, was by far his most popular chocolate, as "few persons were willing to purchase that stamped No. 2 or 3."

"Lapham's" chocolate was Baker's cheapest. He "never pretended that Lapham chocolate was good," but made it to "suit those who would not pay
the cost of good chocolate." The profit on "No. 3" was also slight, but as this and other such products used up the dregs of his inventory, they were worth his attention. In 1827, another Baker product appeared: "Mass" chocolate. It was also an inferior grade, even compared to his "No. 2," but he directed it specifically at the less discriminating "country trade." By 1834, Baker also made several grades of cocoa and cocoa shells which people used to make tea. By diversifying in this manner, Baker created and satisfied an increasing consumer demand for chocolate. By 1844, Baker had cut drastically into the confectionary market with his own ready to eat products. He made fourteen kinds of cocoa, chocolate, and cocoa shells. One of these, "La Cannelle," was perhaps the first candy bar in America. Baker made it specifically to compete with the French and Spanish chocolate confections. Having obtained the authentic recipe for this sweet and spicy chocolate when he visited confectioners in Paris, he considered his brand superior to any American-made cannelle type chocolate. He recommended it to miners and other laborers because they could eat it "raw" or cook it quickly in boiling water.

Other products appeared in the late 1840s. Baker sold "Cocoa Paste" in California — because it dissolved quickly in boiling water, it was an "excellent article for miners to take the diggins [sic]." Tin boxes of "Cannelle," Baker wrote his San Francisco agent in 1849, were good for holding gold. In the 1850s, new varieties of Baker's chocolate, which came wrapped in colorful blue, white, and yellow paper, included "Broma," "Hope," "B&B," "Lillies," "Spanish," "Perf.,” "Smith," "Vanilla," "Diet," "Allen," "EHB," and "French." Many of these were different grades of block chocolate for drinking. Others were molded shapes for eating, as it was in 1847 that confectioners developed the technology to mold chocolate into figures.

Baker estimated that chocolate was edible for at least three years. Its appearance remained fresh for only a short time, though, so he had to sell quickly. To do this, he generally sold to large urban wholesalers. By 1834, he had established his products in urban areas of America and in parts of Canada. He had one agent in the cities of Portland (Maine), St. John's (New Brunswick), Halifax, Savannah, Charleston, Mobile, Richmond, and Newburyport (Massachusetts); he had two agents in New York City and in Alexandria (Virginia); five in Baltimore, three in New Orleans, and several others in Philadelphia and Boston. From these centers, chocolate filtered out to rural areas. He did not ship enormous amounts to any agent. Rather, they ordered on a regular basis and received supplies from Dorchester within a few weeks time. Baker thought that this was the quickest way to get fresh chocolate to the buyer. Smart buyers knew as well that urban stores sold the freshest stock.

While Baker expanded his product line, he also watched the competition. Time and time again, he asked agents about the prices of other chocolate, and whether his prices were too high to compete. He wanted to be certain that his prices were low enough to attract the largest number of buyers. Such competition, along with lower production costs, had succeeded in greatly reduc-
ing the price of chocolate. Chocolate in Baltimore, for instance, cost between twenty and twenty-eight cents per pound in 1804. Forty years later, it cost only half as much.  

In order to distinguish his brand, Baker stamped products — first with his father's imprint, "E. Baker," and then with his own "W. Baker's." Because of the stamp, he had to guard against imitators. This was a serious threat to his reputation, and he protected his name zealously. In 1844, one New York City confectioner stamped his boxes with "Baker, Boston." Baker, "grieved" to know this, wrote to him that "Your placing a name on your cheap article which had never before been used except for a very good article of chocolate might be a great injury to me... Some who wish the best articles hearing that Baker chocolate is a poor cheap article (meaning yours) [may] therefore refuse to buy mine." As Baker wanted to "live in harmony with all... competitors and give to all a fair chance," he told the imitator to stop using the Baker name. Otherwise, Baker threatened, he would make some cheap chocolate, stamp it with the imitator's name, and sell it in New York. Baker thought that was fair retaliation.  

From 1820 to 1840, Baker experienced the kind of business fluctuations that most other manufacturers endured. During the first major banking crisis in American history, from 1819 to 1823, Baker instructed his agents to be careful in accepting western bank notes, and in overextending credit to grocers. His profits rose and fell modestly during the early 1830s, but even through the panic of 1837 and the depression that followed, he managed to run his business profitably. Baker was even more concerned about the condition of his mill. The machinery was worth only five hundred dollars in 1833, and by 1848 it was at least forty years old — and possibly much older. By 1846, Baker's strategy of selling more chocolate in new markets was such a success that he wrote "an increased demand for our chocolate makes it impossible to supply our agents and customers as fast as ordered." Somehow, he had to modernize and expand his production.  

At 1:00 a.m. on May 26, 1848, fire completely destroyed Baker's mill. The circumstances of the fire were curious. First of all, his insurance policy on the building would have expired the next day. Moreover, he had finished manufacturing all the chocolate for the coming season, and had moved the inventory and the bean stock to another building. Instead of saving the mill, firefighters hosed down another building in the complex. Furthermore, the local fire department was only one-eighth of a mile away, and should have been able to reach Baker's mill in five to ten minutes. In addition, Baker's nearby paper mill contained a sophisticated force pump, with two hundred feet of hose. No one claimed that Baker set the fire, and the insurance company paid the claim. But nothing could have benefited Baker more than this fire.  

Baker rebuilt completely on the same site within seven months. He designed the new chocolate mill to be as efficient as a flour mill and as fireproof as a gun powder mill. It was of granite, three stories high with a high gable
roof, and larger than his previous building at fifty-two by forty feet. Two back-to-back charcoal fireplaces on the lower floor roasted cocoa in sheet iron cylinders. The floors around the fireplaces were brick; composition boxes for nearly all the shafting guarded against machinery sparks. Baker was confident that the two stoves to warm employees in one room were safe. Furthermore, all the kettles and millstones had iron pans underneath to catch embers. To prevent any fire from spreading to the chocolate mill from the nearby corn and paper mills, Baker built it with a slate roof and copper gutters. He left no wood exposed. The east side of the building had iron shutters on the windows; the counting house was of stone, with only one "fire source" inside. As all the windows had fastenings on them, Baker was confident that his new mill was "perfectly safe from outside dangers." Although Baker felt that no fire could damage more than one of the mills, he took out another insurance policy which fully covered the buildings, machinery, tools, and inventory.  

OLD STONE MILL OF WALTER BAKER & CO.  
(REBUILT IN 1849.)

From Walter Baker & Co., Cocoa and Chocolate... p. 45.

Baker also installed new mill wheels, one of which was a "Valentine" turbine. This wheel was efficient, powerful, inexpensive, and durable. Baker also tried to buy a fanning mill for $1,200. He had seen one operating at a neighboring chocolate mill, and had ordered an exact copy. The model he received in July of 1848 however, was not a precise replica, so he returned it. The new machinery that Baker installed after the fire cost his insurance com-
pany $5,210. It paid $7,023 for the new mill, and $800 for new accessories (chocolate pans and utensils). In December of 1848, then, Baker had both a new mill worth $13,000, and a full year's income from all the chocolate that survived the fire. He was ready to sell more chocolate than ever before in 1849, which was the beginning of a marked boom in American business.33

Walter Baker was the most successful chocolate manufacturer of his day. Between 1823 and 1852, he developed the eighteenth century chocolate mill into a prosperous nineteenth century manufacturing company. He combined the technology and capital to mass produce cheap chocolate with the business acumen to market it wisely. He kept the loyalty of consumers through aggressive advertising. Because his products were relatively dependable and inexpensive, and because buyers had a choice of numerous kinds of Baker's chocolate, it became America's standard brand. Indeed, Alexis de Toqueville could have been describing Baker's tactics when he wrote in 1835 about the democratization of American goods: "In aristocracies, the craftsman...charged very high prices to a few...He can now get rich quicker by selling to all...a great number which are more or less the same but not so good..."34

By 1855, three years after Walter Baker's death, the demand for chocolate was so steady that the business analyst firm of R. G. Dun & Co. soundly pronounced Walter Baker & Co. to be "making money" and "perfectly safe."35 The first of several cookbooks to call for Baker's chocolate by name appeared in 1869, and thereafter nineteenth century cookbooks recommended no other brand.36 In the 1870s, Walter Baker & Co. and other chocolate manufacturers gained momentum. Between 1869 and 1873, American and British inventors patented several machines and methods for making chocolate. The Confectioner's Journal began publication in 1874, and in 1876 a Swiss invented a method to make milk chocolate. This, along with the Philadelphia International Exposition that same year, gave chocolate sales a tremendous boost. Of the fifty-eight chocolate makers who won awards at Philadelphia, four were American. While judges awarded prizes to other Americans for using "the best sorts of cocoa" or "manufacturing with the greatest care," they rewarded Walter Baker & Co. with a more vague distinction: "a good collection of cocoa and chocolate."37

When General Foods incorporated in 1929, it had merged with some fifteen other packaged food companies. General Foods chose these affiliates largely because of their nationally recognized products, including Maxwell House and Sanka Coffee, Calumet Baking Powder, Minute Tapioca, Jell-O Gelatin, and Grape Nuts Cereal. The oldest brand name that General Foods acquired was that of Baker.38 The history of the Baker chocolate company is noteworthy, in that it did in earlier years what other American manufacturers came to do time and time again in the mid and late nineteenth century. Increasingly, they were able to produce goods in low cost abundance. One important reason that companies such as Pillsbury, Borden, Kraft, Armour, and Post became giants in the American food industry was because — like
Walter Baker & Co. — they skillfully built their reputations around brand names. Also, like Walter Baker & Co., they developed the technology to keep up with the demand that their advertising generated. It was a system of manufacturing and marketing which American business continually repeated in the process of bringing more of practically everything to a great number of people.

NOTES

1. Samuel E. Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea, A Life of Christopher Columbus (Boston, 1942), p. 595; Reay Tannahil, Food in History (New York, 1974), p. 287. Linnaeus named the plant in 1720 using the Greek "theos" (gods) and "broma" (food).


9. Baker to B. G. Sweetser, 22 January 1823; to Grant and Stone, 15 June 1825, 2 September 1825, 4 October 1825, 5 August 1826; to Hussey and Mackay, 4 October 1825, 16 November 1825, 14 December 1825; to William Hewes, 14 December 1825; to Clark and Kellogg, 10 August 1824, 25 November 1825, vol. L-1, Baker Collection.


11. Baker to Grant and Stone, 7 June 1823, 25 July 1823, 5 May 1825, 15 June 1825, 5 August 1826; to Clark and Kellogg, 7 June 1823; to G&H, 19 July 1823; to Hussey and Mackay, 17 July 1823, vol. L-1, Baker Collection.


15. Baker to Clark and Kellogg, 6 March 1827; to Lincoln and Ryers, 12 March 1827; to Grant and Stone, 23 September 1824; to C. Tyler and E. Watkinson, 24 February 1823; to Thomas Hughes and William Larkin, 24 February 1823; to Eleazer Greeley, 2 March 1823; to Hussey and Mackay, 25 December 1822, vol. L-1, Baker Collection.


20. Baker to Thomas Hughes and William Larkin, 24 February 1823; to Hussey and Mackay, 15 November 1823; to Clark and Kellogg, 10 August 1824; to James Tremaine, 29 May 1826, vol. L-1, Baker Collection.


24. Baker to Levering and Gay, 24 November 1849, vol. LA-2, Baker Collection; Sales and Con-
signments, 1853, and Chocolate and Cocoa Sales, 1854, vol. G-1, Baker Collection; Cook,
Chocolate Production and Use, p. 121.

25. Baker to B.G. Sweetser, 22 January 1823; to Grant and Stone, 5 August 1826, col. I-1,
Collection.

26. Baker to Grant and Stone, 9 April 1824, 16 December 1824; to Clark and Kellogg, 15 March
1827, vol. L-1, Baker Collection; Baltimore Price Current, 6 September, 6 December 1804;

27. Baker to Grant and Stone, 27 January 1826, 15 July 1826; to James Brundige, 23 February

28. Baker to Hussey and Mackay, 27 July 1823; to Grant and Stone, 22 September 1823; to

29. Louis McLane, Documents Relative to the Manufacturers in the United States, (Washington,
1833, reprint ed., New York, 1969), I:381; Baker to Hussey and Murray, 24 October

30. Baker to Hussey and Murray, 3 June 1848; to Grant and Stone, 51 May 1848, vol. LA-2,
Baker Collection; Boston Daily Journal, 26 May 1848; Boston Daily Advertiser, 27 May 1848;
Baker to L. Hughes, Secretary of the Rhode Island Mutual Fire Insurance Company, 15


32. Baker to Whitney, 30 May 1848; to Timothy French, 27 July 1848, 14 August 1848, vol.
LA-2, Baker Collection; Boston Post, 1 June 1848.


34. Alexis de Toqueville, Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence, ed., by J.B. Mayer

35. R.G. Dunn & Co., "Credit Ledger," vol. 72, p. 244, Manuscript Division, Baker Library.

recipes using Baker's Chocolate, see Eliza Follett, Young Housekeeper's Assistant (Sandusky,
Ohio, 1874), p. 77; M.S. Woodman, Choice Recipes (Boston, 1875), pp. 85-87, 114-15; Jane
Buckingham, Housekeeper's Friend (Zanesville, Ohio, 1876), pp. 86, 678; Cooking Recipes
(Chicago, 1877), p. 135.

37. Patents for Inventions, (Washington, 1874), 1:passim; Chauncey DePew, One Hundred
Years of American Commerce, 1795-1895, 2 vols. (New York, 1895), I:626-27; Eileen Chatt,
Cocoa, Cultivation, Processing, Analysis (New York, 1953), p. 11; The United States Cen-
tennial Commission, The International Exhibition, 1876, Reports and Awards, ed. Frank A.
Walker (Washington, 1880), IV:385-39; United States Centennial Commission, Interna-
tional Exhibition, 1876, Official Catalogue (Philadelphia, 1876), dept. IV., p. 23.

(New York City, 1930), pp. 14-16.