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CHOCOLATE WELLNESS TOURISM IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

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CHOCOLATE WELLNESS TOURISM IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Chocolate wellness tourism has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially in countries in Central and South America, where cacao and chocolate originated and were used by ancient civilizations. Chocolate wellness tourism has significantly influenced the medicinal uses and values associated with chocolate and cacao. Wellness and food tourism are becoming increasingly popular as people seek experiences that value healthier lifestyles and an authentic sense of place. Research has focused on the health benefits of consuming chocolate. However, there is a need to investigate how tourism may change the values surrounding chocolate, as tourism involves the exchange of values and ideas across different backgrounds and cultures. Using a cultural exchange framework, this project examines tourism literature, archival data on chocolate and cacao, and case studies of cacao farms and tastings. This project examines how the growth of chocolate tourism has changed how tourists and communities present chocolate's wellness value. By engaging with local communities, tourism allows for cultural preservation, educational exchange, and intercultural connections.

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Introduction

Imagine stepping into a lush forest in a cacao plantation in the heart of Latin America, surrounded by the rich, earthy aroma of ripe cacao pods, vibrantly hanging from their trees. Here is where the bean-to-bar journey begins, where you will pick the pods right from the tree. Then, you will get to cut open the pod, where you will find the white pulpy fruit covering the raw beans. The beans are then set to ferment. You will take sun-dried beans and cut them open. You will then roast the beans for about 10 to 15 minutes in a pot over the fire. Once they start popping almost like popcorn, you take them out and peel the outer layer, revealing the actual cacao bean. The beans are then ground using a stone grinder or wheel into cocoa powder, so it can be melted with water to turn into chocolate. This sensory experience encapsulates the essence of chocolate tourism, allowing tourists to explore the history and health tied to chocolate.

Chocolate has been a very popular treat since ancient Mesoamerican civilizations cultivated it and European colonizers brought it back to Europe. Indigenous to Central and South America, cacao has played a central role in the traditions and cultures of Mesoamerica, being considered a food of the gods. During the Classic period (A.D. 250-900), it had various uses, such as for food, medicine, psychoactives, containers, and even firewood (McNeil, Bletter, & Daly, 2003, p. 48; McNeil & Steinbrenner, 2003, p. 263; Simon & McNeil, 2003, p. 117). Most uses were related to medicinal uses, including external and internal soothing agents, antiseptics, and snakebite remedies (McNeil, Bletter, & Daly, 2003, p. 62). In modern times, cacao is still an important part of the local communities, but has lost many of its uses (McNeil, 2003, p. 24).

Wellness tourism is becoming increasingly popular as consumers look for ways to live healthier lifestyles. Wellness tourism can be defined as “travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one’s personal wellbeing” (Global Wellness Institute, 2025). This is

not to be confused with medical tourism, which focuses on treating health conditions. Wellness tourism, on the other hand, focuses on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, reducing stress, preventing disease, and enhancing well-being (Global Wellness Institute, 2025). This intersects with food tourism, which is defined as “the act of traveling for a taste of place in order to gain a deeper sense of place” (World Food Travel Association, n.d.). In this sense, tourists aim to explore areas where organic and sustainable foods are valued.

There has been an increased demand for sustainable, organic, and dark chocolate, which has led to increased cacao production in countries in Central and South America (Hernández-Ortega et al., 2022; Lukacs de Pereny, 2015; Leissle, 2019). This has led to tourists visiting places where cacao is grown and chocolate is made, such as farms and estates, as this region is where cacao originated. Tourism is encouraged as local communities want to preserve their culture, protect their environment, and provide for themselves (Chapillon, 2025). As a result, small cacao estates have allowed tourists to visit and tour the farms, and some even allow tastings of their chocolate and make chocolate bars to promote and expand the chocolate industry in the region.

Using a cultural exchange framework and digital ethnography, this project examines how the growth of chocolate tourism has changed how tourists and communities present chocolate’s wellness value in traditionally chocolate-using regions. Tourism can influence and change cultures, so how does this relate to the use of chocolate? By engaging with local communities, tourism allows for cultural preservation, educational exchange, and intercultural connections. This may lead to less traditional practices and more modernized traditions of chocolate made specifically for tourists.

Methodology

The definition of culture can vary by person and discipline. For this project, I will interpret culture as a dynamic system of shared values, beliefs, and practices that connect people. Culture is always changing, whether through internal processes, like inventions or necessities, or external processes, like economic, political, environmental, or cultural influences (Burns, 1999; Medeiros, 2020; Monaghan & Just, 2000).

The terms “chocolate” and “cacao” should also be defined, as they are not interchangeable. The term cacao refers to the plant *Theobroma cacao*, which includes the tree, pod, and bean. Chocolate is a product created from cacao by roasting and processing the cacao beans (Wilson, 2015, pp. 2-3). Generally, cacao is where chocolate comes from, and chocolate is made from cacao.

For this project, I will be using a cultural exchange framework to examine how tourists and local communities exchange chocolate wellness values. Cultural exchange is the process by which cultural beliefs, practices, and ideas spread between societies or groups, highlighting the interconnectedness of human societies (Burns, 1999; Jack & Phipps, 2005). Exchange is not always necessarily monetary items; this could also include stories, goods, love, friendship, community, social hierarchies, and cultural values (Jack & Phipps, 2005). As tourists and local communities engage with each other, they have the chance to exchange ideas and values, which may change attitudes toward cacao and chocolate wellness. For instance, in the case of cacao estate tours, many involve learning about the history of cacao, how it is grown, and its uses. Through this, tourists get the chance to learn about the value of cacao and chocolate to the local community. This theoretical lens helps understand the perspective of tourists and local communities.

For collecting my data, I will be using a digital ethnography methodology. Digital ethnography is a qualitative research method that studies human behaviors, culture, and social interactions within digital environments, including social media, digital media, virtual worlds, artificial intelligence, and video games (Proctor, 2026; Underberg & Zorn, 2013; Underberg-Goode & Otañez, 2026).

I looked through social media posts, travel blogs, and reviews from travel websites to better understand how tourists reacted to chocolate estate/farm tours and what experiences they valued, as well as how hosts marketed tours. I did this through a Google search of the top 20 results, using the terms “chocolate tour” and “Latin America” to look at trends surrounding this market in Central and South American chocolate estates and farms, and what was most popular or searched. I focused on tours that utilized a bean-to-bar experience, as these were the results that mostly came up. I examined websites that advertised tours and social media posts that took video and explained the bean-to-bar process. Afterwards, I went to travel websites that advertised these tours to find more information about the tourist experience and reviews of the tour, including Viator, Tripadvisor, and GetYourGuide. I focused on themes that repeatedly popped up in reviews, which included authenticity and education of the cacao process. For the tourist reviews, I only refer to them by the initials of their usernames to keep some anonymity with their identities, even if these posts are on public sites.

History of Cacao

Cacao’s natural habitat is in the range 20 degrees south and north of the equator. In Mesoamerica, indigenous cultures began cultivating it. Cacao became an important crop, with uses such as currency, medicine, and food (Afoakwa, 2017; McNeil, McNeil, et al., 2003). As a

food, it was traditionally beaten with water into *chocolatl*, with flavorings such as vanilla, honey, and chilies, and maize to form a bitter chocolate drink (Afoakwa, 2017). Since the recipes for the drink were said to be from the gods, only the elite, typically adult men, would drink it, while the women of the lower class would prepare it (Leissle, 2018, p. 33; McNeil, Kaufman, & Justeson, 2003, p. 117). Cacao would also be reserved for rituals and for devotional offerings (McNeil, 2003a, p. 24; Walters, 2021). They used cacao for various rituals relating to healing ceremonies, agriculture, funerals, and puberty.

During Hernán Cortés's conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1520, the Aztecs prepared chocolate for him. He learned to change the bitter drink they prepared for him by adding cane sugar and honey, bringing it back to Spain as "hot chocolate" (Briggs et al., 2015, p. 83). The preparation method remained a secret until the decline of Spain as a global power, which became known throughout Europe and gained widespread popularity as a "delicious, healthy 'food' enjoyed by the wealthy" (Briggs et al., 2015, p. 83). Large-scale cultivation of cacao began in Central America by the Spaniards during the 16th century, spreading to other European countries in the 17th and 18th centuries (Afoakwa, 2017).

It was not until the Industrial Revolution that chocolate became available to the public as a bar, as new manufacturing methods produced more for less (Briggs et al., 2015, p. 83). The first chocolate bar was created in the United Kingdom by Joseph Fry in 1857 by adding cocoa butter (Beckett, 2008). The first milk chocolate was created in Switzerland by Daniel Peter in 1876 by adding condensed milk (Beckett, 2008).

Globalization has spread cacao cultivation to other parts of the world. Most cacao today grows mainly in West Africa, with Central and South American countries now producing less than a fifth of world cacao production (Leissle, 2018, pp. 4-5). Additionally, many traditional

uses for cacao have decreased in these regions over the years (McNeil, 2003b, p. 365). Nevertheless, chocolate is now one of the world's most craved sweets.

Health Aspects and Uses

In Mesoamerica, indigenous people had numerous medicinal uses for cacao. The main categories for medicinal uses include stimulants for fatigue, high-calorie foods for weight gain, external and internal soothing agents, antiseptics, and snakebite remedies (McNeil, Bletter, & Daly, 2003, p. 62). Most of the practices fell under the soothing agents. Cacao leaves and seeds would be used to soothe many parts of the body, soothing cracked lips, sore throats, dry coughs, and vaginal and scalp irritations (McNeil, Bletter, & Daly, 2003, p. 63). As an antiseptic, cacao contains numerous compounds that help prevent infection in wounds (McNeil, Bletter, & Daly, 2003, p. 63).

Cacao was also used during healing rituals in Mayan culture before European contact. Healers inherited their position in society and were educated in observation, divination, and the interpretation of omens (Walters, 2021, p. 12). Healers would perform healing ceremonies for various ailments, depending on the context, including fevers, seizures, puberty, and fertility. During the ritual, cacao was often mixed with other remedies, such as chilies, honey, and tobacco (Walters, 2021, p. 12). They were added to make the mixture more effective and palatable.

Much like in Mesoamerica, cacao is continually known for its medicinal properties. Research on the properties of cacao has shown that it has various benefits, including as a source of antioxidants, stimulants, and vitamins.

Antioxidants are compounds that slow the oxidation of chemicals that cause key bodily systems to lose function. Antioxidants are known to fight against heart disease, hypertension, and cancer. Many studies (Andújar, 2012; Belščak et al., 2009; Castell et al, 2013; Cruz et al, 2015;

Ioannone et al., 2015; Mazor et al., 2011; McShea et al., 2015; Wollgast & Anklam, 2000) have examined how the antioxidant properties in cacao, mostly how it can reduce cardiovascular disease, with some studies even suggesting that its antioxidant activity is higher than in other foods, such as açaí and blueberries, which are known as high-antioxidant foods (Hernández-Ortega, 2022, p. 29; Walters, 2021, p. 19). These studies do find that the antioxidant properties are higher in darker chocolate, as dark chocolate has more cacao than milk chocolate.

The stimulants in cacao have been studied, mostly caffeine, known to increase energy and awareness. While it does not provide as many of these effects as a cup of coffee, which provides 220 mg, there are still some effects found, about 4 mg of caffeine (Grumezescu & Holban, 2019). Some of the research on stimulants has also looked at how they could improve mood; however, more research needs to be done in this area (Meier, 2017). There has been some research on cacao as a source of vitamins and nutrients. For example, because cacao beans are highly susceptible to fungi, when the beans are dried and exposed to UV light, the final product contains a high amount of Vitamin D (Walters, 2021, p. 21).

Bean-to-Bar Experience

Chocolate tourism is a type of specialized food tourism in which tourists visit places around the consumption of chocolate, such as touring cacao farms, participating in tasting and cooking workshops, and learning about the history of cacao. As the world's chocolate consumption increases and different regions add different flavors, people are enticed to try new flavors and varieties of chocolate (Leissle, 2018, p. 180; McNeil & Aguilar-Moreno, 2003, p. 282).

In the wellness aspect, chocolate tourism involves specifically going to places where pure dark chocolate can be found. Particularly, the demand for dark chocolate has been increasing, as

well as “raw”, organic, and sustainable chocolate (Leissle, 2018, pp. 9-10). While West African countries produce the most cacao, Central and South American countries specialize in producing quality cacao beans and chocolate that consumers seek, including organic and fine-flavor beans, which are perceived to have a rare or prized flavor (Leissle, 2018, pp. 161-162). People are more enticed to visit places with special quality cacao, especially since these flavors are produced on a small scale. Most of these tourists come from the United States and the United Kingdom; there are also those from Spain, Paraguay, Chile, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Canada, and Australia.

Additionally, as consumers are more aware of chocolate’s healthy benefits, they are increasingly seeking these chocolates. In order to make chocolate more attractive to consumers, chocolate manufacturers increasingly make functional chocolate that highlights its health benefits (Hernández-Ortega, 2022, p. 28). As a result, tourists aim to seek experiences that will let them experience chocolate that will have as many health benefits as possible, seeking “pure” and “raw” chocolate. It is important to note that the chocolate is not actually raw (otherwise it would not be edible). What makes it raw is that it does not have the extra additives and sugar that chocolate at the grocery store may have. It is believed that it is raw since it visibly comes straight from the tree, not that it is actually raw. In this case, the chocolate would be healthier because it does not have extra sugar to make it more palatable or sweeter, and since it contains more cacao.

In an effort to try these specialised chocolates and experience them in their “purest” form, people participate in cacao farm or estate tours. Most of these chocolate farms include a “bean-to-bar” experience, where a tourist gets the chance to explore the environment where cacao grows, in this case, the farm or estate. Depending on how hands-on the tour is, the tourist can actually make their own chocolate from the beans, which includes harvesting the pods and

extracting the beans; fermenting and sun-drying; roasting, winnowing, and grinding the beans; and finally conching and tempering to transform the cacao into the tourist's own chocolate bar (Machu Travel Peru, 2025). After, the tourists get to taste their handmade chocolate made from “raw” healthy cacao. During the tour, the tour guide or the families running the farm talk about the history of cacao and some of its nutritional benefits.

Ecuador Tours

Ecuador is the largest producer of fine-flavor cacao in the world, producing around 65% of the world's supply (Díaz-Montenegro et al., 2018). The definition of fine flavor is controversial and subjective, but the main criteria focus on the genetic origin of planting material, morphological characteristics of the plant, flavor characteristics, chemical characteristics, degree of fermentation, drying, acidity, off-flavors, percentage of internal mould, insect infestation, and percentage of impurities (ICCO, 2024). Generally, fine-flavored cacao beans come from Criollo or Trinitario tree varieties, while bulk/ordinary beans come from Forastero tree varieties (ICCO, 2024). Ecuador's fine flavor beans are an exception as they are from Forestoero tree varieties. Fine-flavour cacao beans differ from ordinary/bulk beans in that they differ in their focus on flavour. Fine-flavor cacao can have varying flavors, such as fruit, floral, herbal, wood, nut, and caramel (ICCO, 2024).

Ecuador is known for its cacao tours, as fine-flavor cacao is popular, particularly the Nacional variety, described as having a floral, spicy, and green aroma (Rohmah et al., 2022, p. 60). Tasting chocolate in Ecuador is marketed as more than simply tasting chocolate:

A fine-aroma Ecuador chocolate tasting is more than just a food experience. It opens a door to centuries of indigenous knowledge, sustainable farming, and community-led projects. You can easily combine visiting with other activities. For example, you can take

a chocolate tour and go birdwatching in the cloud forest (Machu Travel Peru, 2025, “Why Ecuador is a must-visit for chocolate lovers”)

As Machu Travel Peru, a travel agency that offers tours in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia, notes, Ecuador chocolate tours allow tourists to experience the history of cacao, the making of chocolate, and local communities' activities. Additionally, some tours even include other activities, such as hiking, beekeeping, and birdwatching. This way, it might make it more enticing to tourists who are interested in doing various activities.

Chocolate tastings can also be considered a preservation of the local community's culture and environment:

For Esteban, this is more than a tasting — it's an act of preservation, celebration, and respect. By visiting Ecuador and taking part in this experience, travelers help sustain a living link to the Amazon's ancient past while shaping the future of ethical chocolate. *“Travelers make this possible,”* he says simply. *“Thanks to them, good things are happening.”* (Chapillon, 2025, “The World's Most Valued Chocolate”)

Esteban, a local tour guide in Ecuador, describes how tourists help preserve the past and continue to support ethical chocolate production. That is, the tourists learn the importance of chocolate to the community and its history. Rather than just tasting the cacao, communities get to teach their history and how chocolate benefits their community. Tourists also find the tours informative and engaging:

This was an immersive experience for our small group, where we walked through the grove of cacao trees, gaining an understanding of different species, as well as how adjacent plants and pollination can change the flavor each tree produces. Following that, we participated in each step of taking the pod all the way to chocolate bar for each of us. I

now understand just how much effort and expertise it takes to create perfect chocolate. Ecuador has a rich history of growing excellent cacao, and is now positioning itself as a major player in chocolate making. The tour was followed by a delicious lunch prepared in the kitchen and under a shelter beside the cacao trees and small river. Allison was our guide and she was wonderful throughout, also explaining what we were seeing on the drive to and from the plantation. She shared stories about her family and how Ecuadorians live and their culture. Darwin was our driver and he was fabulous, too. (Viator, n.d., “An Immersive Experience and Delicious Chocolate”)

At a family-owned cacao farm in Guayaquil, Ecuador, tourist G.A. got to see how cacao is grown, learn about cacao, its history, the local culture, and make their own chocolate. It was a mix of tasting the chocolate and learning about its importance. Overall, cacao farm tours emphasize learning about the bean and then transforming it into chocolate.

Colombia tours

While Colombia’s cacao tours are not as popular as Ecuador’s, tourists do choose farms to visit. Colombia is the world’s 9th largest producer of cacao, though most of its small farms also include other crops as well, such as coffee or fruit (Roger, 2017, p. 114). Cacao tours in Colombia also include the bean-to-bar experience, allowing tourists to learn the history of cacao and the local community traditions. Family-owned farms aim to showcase their cacao as sustainable and organic so that tourists may be enticed to visit their farms:

This family-owned farm has dedicated itself to sustainable and organic cacao production, offering visitors an authentic look into the process from bean to bar. You will share with local experts who will explain the secrets of cultivating fine Colombian cacao and help you experience the traditional chocolate-making process firsthand. Alongside this, you

will enjoy stunning Andean landscapes and indulge in some delicious handmade chocolate. (Gran Colombia Tours, n.d., “Overview”)

The “authenticity” of chocolate is highlighted at a farm in Circasia, Colombia, where tourists can experience traditional Colombian chocolate-making from bean to bar. The chocolate making also allows tourists to experience traditional chocolate making, distinguishing it from large-scale manufacturers. Tourists appreciate the “authenticity” and how hands-on the experience is:

This was probably the best chocolate experience I’ve done, even after having traveled to Europe. Most chocolate tours I’ve been on talk you through the chocolate making process, then you are presented with a bunch of chocolates that you can buy. This tour was different in that you start in the actual field, picking some of the cocoa pods from the trees. Sandra, who makes the chocolate takes you through every step of the process and you do most of the work! You pick the pods, dig out the seeds (you can eat the pulp around the seed and it’s actually pretty good!), roast them, peel the cocoa beans with Sandra and her mother, then decide how much sugar to add to your chocolate. You’ll have to do the tour to know the rest of the process! Yuly was my guide for the day that took me out to the farm and she was fantastic to converse with and exchange information about our countries. Her outgoing personality made the tour so much better! (Viator, n.d.-a, “Fantastic Tour Where You Actually Make Chocolate!”)

For a tour in Medellín, Colombia, tourist K.H. describes how they enjoyed being able to actually make their own chocolate from the bean, rather than learning about the process, then buying pre-made chocolate. That is, the tourist values being able to actually experience making the chocolate themselves and going through the work, rather than having someone else do it for them. This tour also showcases the other crops that they grow:

Very informative and authentic down home country farm. The owners were very friendly, and showed all fruit trees, coffee plants, and three different chocolate varieties. Also, the farm was picturesque with many different flowers. Of course, you could not ask for a better guide. (Viator, n.d.-a, “Very informative and interesting”)

Tourist H.V. notes how this same tour not only has chocolate trees. As mentioned earlier, most Colombian farms also include other crops. While the main reason tourists visit the farm is to experience “pure” chocolate, the farm also gets the chance to talk about the rest of their farm and give recognition to other crops that they grow.

Peru workshops

Peru does not produce a lot of cacao; however, it is the 2nd largest organic cacao producer in the world. Organic markets are competitive, so Peruvian cacao producers' advantage in the cacao market is their quality cacao (Lukacs de Pereny, 2015). Unlike Ecuador and Colombia, where most bean-to-bar workshops happen outdoors, from taking the cacao from the tree to including farm tours, Peru’s workshops mostly occur indoors. Tourists still get that chance to experience making their own “pure” chocolate, but they do not get to experience the jungle of the cacao farm, as tourist R.O. points out: “I expected it to be more complete like going out the jungle harvesting fruit and processing the beans, instead of just filling plastic moulds” (Tripadvisor, n.d., “Workshop”).

Instead, Peru’s cacao workshops focus on showing tourists how their organic cacao is special. The workshop still includes the bean-to-bar experience of making chocolate and learning the history of cacao and its traditions. But workshops also focus on the importance of sustainable farming and organic cacao:

This workshop goes beyond flavor. Every bite tells the story of the producing communities of Ivochote, Quillabamba, Cusco, whose traditions, languages, and farming methods are preserved through cacao. By joining, you support sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, and small Peruvian farmers — while creating a chocolate bar that is uniquely yours. (GetYourGuide, n.d., “Full Description”)

That is, there is more emphasis on how sustainable and organic farming is helpful to the environment, while also including the bean-to-bar experiences. Additionally, the workshop highlights the chance to learn about the local community, such as its traditions and languages. Instead of just talking about the flavor of the chocolate, the tourist can also look at how chocolate, the community, and the environment intersect.

Craving Authenticity

One of the main focuses of the reviews was on the authenticity of the chocolate. Authenticity is a social construct. While the definition is rooted in honesty and truth, authenticity is grounded in a person’s own background and knowledge (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020; Kaplan, 2019). Therefore, authenticity is subjective, and what a person considers authentic varies. In the tourism context, this includes having a genuine, real, or original experience (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). While tourists value authentic experiences, those experiences may not be the reality, but rather what the tourist perceives as genuine.

Role of consumer education

Most of these tours and workshops in Central and South America include an educational aspect. Most focus on the history of cacao, but some also discuss the local community. That is, tourists visiting their home give them the chance to exchange knowledge (Chapillon, 2025, “The World’s Most Valued Chocolate”). Most of this exchange is one-sided, in the sense that most of

the information is given for the tourist to learn about. For the most part, travel blogs, travel sites, guides, and farm owners include and emphasize the ability to learn about cacao's history, farming methods, and the local community. When advertising the experience, there is also a mention that tourists can experience the “authentic” culture of the community. This is packaged with the ability to make a chocolate bar, so that it remains entertaining to the tourist, as tourists in general value a mix of entertainment and education (Du Cros & McKercher, 2020). Cacao tours seem to be a way for the community to teach its values to the tourists and show them the “authentic” ways of cacao and its importance to them. As a result, the local community can bring attention to their livelihoods and can preserve their culture and environment.

While not as prominent, the local community also has a chance to learn about the tourists and their interests. Since most tours involve a small number of tourists (usually up to 20 participants), there is a chance to talk about each other's countries, as tourists K.H. notes (Viator, n.d.-a, “Fantastic Tour Where You Actually Make Chocolate!”). There is some personality involved, so the locals can learn more about the people visiting. In some cases, the tours may be adjusted to answer tourists' questions or interests. The local community does put some importance on entertaining the tourists, but it also gives them more opportunities to showcase their farms and livelihoods, giving the tourists more knowledge about cacao.

Value of multisensory experience

Tourists also value the multisensory aspects of the tour. Multisensory experience in tourism focuses on how immersive experiences engage the five senses (Agapito et al, 2013; Banaszekiewicz & Nikielska-Sekula, 2025; Brochado et al., 2021; Pan & Ryan, 2009). In this case, tourists get to experience multiple senses as they explore the farm and ultimately create their own chocolate bar. The tourists get to see where cacao grows, smell the aromatic notes as

the cocoa beans are roasting, touch the cacao from pod to bar, taste the dark chocolate, and hear about the process and the history. Together, this creates an immersive experience for the tourists.

This creates the authenticity of making a pure chocolate bar. As the tourist experiences these multiple senses, they become part of the process of making dark chocolate. That is, they do not passively learn about the process, but get to actually experience it for themselves. Here, they learn the process by actually doing it themselves and feeling all the dimensions of the process. This makes the process more genuine and visible.

Shift to perceived health

By learning about history and the locals, the “authenticity” of making traditional and “pure” cacao is emphasized. The purer a food is, the more authentic it is considered (Collinson, 2026). The “authenticity” of making chocolate from the bean and being engaged in the whole process seems to emphasize its health benefits. The darker the chocolate, the more health benefits it includes. As consumers seek healthier products, there is a greater demand for healthier chocolate. However, there is less emphasis on the discovered health benefits and more focus on the visibility of wellness.

The tours’ marketing focuses on how the craft of the bean-to-bar experience showcases the sustainable and organic aspects of the chocolate. By making organic chocolate, a tourist can experience chocolate with as many health benefits as possible. While this does not differ much from buying organic dark chocolate at a store, at a bean-to-bar workshop, a person can physically see how raw, nutrient-dense cacao beans transform into chocolate while preserving their health benefits. So, for a tourist to make their own chocolate bar from raw beans feels more “authentic” and offers more health benefits than buying the same chocolate in a store. Many of the tourists do not take note of the chemical health benefits of cacao. Even though tours advertise health

benefits as an added feature, tourists focus more on the authenticity of making a bar straight from the tree. The wellness aspect becomes more of a focus than health. While the health benefits are important, the wellness value focuses on how engaging in the authentic creation of chocolate brings out its true health and wellness value.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the growth of chocolate tourism in Central and South America reveals the changing importance of cacao and chocolate to the local communities and tourists. As tourists seek “authentic” chocolate, they engage with local communities and gain insights into their livelihoods and values. On the other hand, local communities get to teach tourists about cacao’s history and their traditions. This relationship between tourists and locals creates an appreciation for “authentic” and “pure” chocolate. Additionally, the multisensory aspect of the tours allows the tourist to be fully engaged in the chocolate-making process. Rather than being a passive observer, the tourist actively and physically learns how to make chocolate. Chocolate tourism reveals how tourists' wellness values are based on the authenticity and perceived health of chocolate, rather than the science behind it.

This exemplifies cultural exchange in the sense that tourists seeking authentic experiences get to learn about the knowledge and traditions surrounding cacao in the local communities, gain hands-on experience in the craft of chocolate making, and learn about the local communities' values. Tourists get to see chocolate as more than just a treat, but as a treat with history and value.

This contributes to anthropological knowledge by emphasizing how tourism facilitates cultural exchange through education and multisensory experience, how authenticity is valued by tourists, and how perceived health and wellness trends reveal social values of health and

authenticity. Overall, chocolate wellness tourism reveals how culinary experiences shape how tourists perceive chocolate and how this affects cultural dynamics and the globalization of cacao.

For future research, I would recommend looking deeper into the importance of consumer education in cacao tours. Participating in the tours with the tourists would help to see how cacao's value is framed. It would also be helpful to have interviews with both locals and tourists to understand their views on healthy chocolate. While looking at reviews and social media posts provides insight into tourists' and locals' values, actually hearing from them would give a better understanding.

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