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March 19, 2006

Raw Cacao (Chocolate)—Dangerous?

This is interesting. There was a [Chocolate in the Raw](#) class taught last Saturday by Jeff Rogers, of Naughty Vegan in Seattle. Recently, there seems to be a lot of controversy over whether raw cacao is healthy and beneficial for you. Everybody seems to be promoting cacao (also known as "raw chocolate") as "healthy."

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Opponents claim that raw cacao produces an acidic residue (thus, not an alkaline ash) in the body and that it's addicting because it contains theobromine. David Wolfe and Shazzie are in favor of raw cacao, since they just published a book together called, [Naked Chocolate](#). Paul Nison and Frederic Patenaude, on the other hand, seem to think that raw cacao can be dangerous.

In his most recent newsletter, Paul Nison had this to say about raw cacao...

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"And while I'm on the topic of my new book, I will expose the truth about the cacao craze. BOTTOM LINE: CACAO IS DANGEROUS! It is another addicting food that is setting people up for a big down fall.

Adding fuel to the fire, [Frederic Patenaude](#) writes this about cacao and raw chocolate...

Many of my readers have been asking me what I think of the whole raw cacao craze. For those who don't know, raw cacao beans are now sold by different raw-food companies as the latest 'superfood.' Cacao beans are traditionally roasted and used to make chocolate. Now, raw-foodists have found a raw version of the beloved bean and are apparently using it for its magical properties.

First, let me start by explaining what my own personal use of cacao is. I've known for a long time that cacao is a stimulant. Not as strong as coffee, but its stimulating 'qualities' are easy to spot when your body is not used to eating such foods. Because of this, I often used carob powder in my recipes. Carob powder is made from a fruit and has a taste that reminds of chocolate. It is naturally sweet. Instead of being a stimulant, carob is a mineral rich food and has a calming effect. So, like most raw-foodists, I used carob powder in my recipes. But, then one day, I decided to use cacao powder. I figured: if I'm going to make something that tastes like chocolate, why not use the real thing? I've noticed that cacao has a stimulating effect, but since I was using it occasionally (i.e. less than once a month) and just for fun in some recipes, I was not too bothered by that little indiscretion. However, I never considered it to be a health food.

Now, cacao beans are sold to us at an exorbitant price under the assumption that it's one of the best things we could ever eat. I couldn't disagree more.

First of all, cacao beans are not really food. If you found them in nature, you wouldn't eat the seeds. You would eat the fruit, which is apparently delicious, and throw away the seeds. Even if you wanted to eat the seeds, they would not taste like chocolate. In order for the cacao seeds to taste like chocolate and become the cacao beans that we know, they have to be fermented first. They

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are fairly bitter, indicating the presence of a poison. And when I say a 'poison,' I'm not making this up. Just do a little research and you'll discover that cacao contains many chemicals with a stimulating effects, such as theobromine and caffeine.

A popular article on raw cacao beans claims that cacao "increase(s) your focus and alertness and contains nutrients to keep you happy." My answer to that is the same as has been said and is being said about coffee. The fact is that what people actually confuse with "alertness" is actually an adrenal response to the stress that the body has to deal with when eliminating the toxins found in cacao beans. What you get is NOT energy. What you experience as energy is actually your body working hard to establish balance (homeostasis) again! It's like whipping a horse. Eventually, it will fall down.

Here's an excerpt from Neal Barnard's book, *Breaking the Food Seduction...*

Researchers at the University of Michigan brought out the truth about chocolate. In a research study, they gave 26 volunteers a drug called 'noxalone.' They then offered them a tray filled with Snicker's Bars, M&Ms, chocolate chip cookies, and Oreos. Normally, these snacks would have quickly disappeared. But, the drug knocked out the desire for chocolate. A candy bar was not much more exciting than a crust of dry bread.

Noxalone is an opiate blocker. That is, it stops heroin, morphine, and other narcotics from affecting the brain. And, it blocks the effects of chocolate, too. This research study showed that chocolate's appeal does not come from its creamy texture or deep brown color. **Chocolate stimulates the same part of the brain that morphine acts on.** For all intents and purposes, chocolate is a drug — not necessarily a bad one and not a terribly strong one, but strong enough, nonetheless, to keep us coming back for more."

Many people would argue that when cacao is not cooked, these chemicals do not have the same effect on the body. But yet, those same people actually admit to eating cacao beans for their stimulating effect! Many people have reported not being able to fall asleep if they eat cacao beans late at night and that they are still looking for the "best" time of the day to eat them. Others tell me that when they eat cacao beans, they get so much energy, but then have a 'down' later on. Does that remind you of something?

If you like the taste, you could use some cacao once in a while in a recipe. But don't fool yourself into thinking that there's somehow something really good about this. Personally, I would consider using cacao when making a special desert for a special occasion. I don't recommend eating cacao otherwise. I don't find anything special in it. I don't buy the whole raw cacao craze and I don't think it is worth the price that is charged for it.

Remember: A rose by any other name is ... just as thorny.

So, who should you believe? Well, you'll have to make your own decision. However, be careful if you choose to eat cacao. Try only a small amount first, and make sure you have no negative reactions to it.

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