**Theobroma cacao: the Cacao Tree**

Cocoa beans come from the cacao tree. The cocoa belt is found exclusively around the equator, with most cocoa trees growing within 10° of the equator. Cacao trees need a humid climate with a lot of rain. They grow best in the partial shade of large rainforest trees. The cacao tree is an evergreen that grows to be 15–25 feet tall. The fruit, which is called a pod, grows directly from the trunk and can reach 4–12 inches in length. The pods ripen into a variety of colors such as red, yellow and purple.

Each pod contains 20–60 cocoa beans, enclosed by sweet pulp. Because cacao trees tolerate the shade of taller rainforest trees, the rainforest does not need to be destroyed to grow cocoa. Each tree produces only 50–60 pods a year, yielding 15–20 pounds of beans. A single pod can contain 20–40 beans, and it takes around 400 beans to make only one pound of chocolate!

**Harvest**

Harvest takes place twice a year from November to January and May to July. The fruit is hand-picked to protect the trees. Once harvested from the trees, the pods are opened and their seeds are removed.

**Fermentation**

First, the beans and pulp are laid in fermentation boxes. The process of fermentation produces heat, requiring the beans to be stirred. At the end of the five-day fermentation process, the beans become brown, bitterness subsides, and the flavor develops.

**Drying**

After fermentation, the beans still contain too much water to be turned into chocolate. The beans are spread out in the sunshine to dry. Most beans are sun-dried for up to 14 days. After drying, the beans are inspected and separated.