

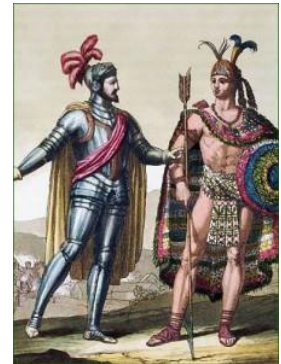


Failed Cake to Family Favorite: Brownie History

By Ira Bletz, Supervising Naturalist

The story of the brownie starts over 2,200 years ago when the Myans began mashing and eating the beans of the cacao plant – and chocolate was born! Chocolate was unknown outside of the New World before Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. When Columbus returned to Spain he presented chocolate to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand along with many other treasures from the Americas. The unsweetened beverage did not catch on.

Chocolate's big break came in 1519 when Hernando Cortez met the Aztec King Montezuma. Montezuma introduced Cortez to the royal drink, "chocolati". Since it was bitter, Cortez decided to sweeten it with cane sugar. By the time this version of "chocolati" reached Spain it was mixed with two other imports, cinnamon and vanilla. Served hot, this new mixture quickly became a favorite of Spain's aristocracy. It was so prized, Spain managed to keep the wonder of hot chocolate from the rest of Europe for nearly 100 years.



Once the secret got out it quickly spread to France where chocolate became a health craze. It was said to promote vigor and ward off many ailments. From France it was a short hop across the English Channel where London's first Chocolate House opened in 1657.

In America, chocolate was first enjoyed as an unsweetened after-dinner beverage served like coffee. Later it was sweetened with sugar. Before the mid-1700s both chocolate and sugar were expensive ingredients so chocolate was reserved for the wealthiest members of society. Chocolate became less expensive as production was ramped up in America. Chocolate's journey from luxury to national favorite took a big step in 1780 when Dr. James Baker opened the first chocolate factory (Baker's Chocolate) in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Cocoa powder arrived in stores in 1828 and the first chocolate candy bar was introduced in 1842. By the late 1800s American cooks were baking chocolate cakes and their families were eating them up.



On such cook was Mildred Brown Schrupf of Bangor, Maine. According to the story, she was baking a chocolate cake and, through what would become a very happy accident, Mildred forgot to add the leavening to her recipe. The cake failed to rise. But Mildred was a frugal cook and she decided not to waste the flat cake. She cut it into squares, served it to her family and an American legend was born! The newly created “Bangor Brownies” became a local favorite.

The first brownie recipe, Mildred’s recipe, was published in the 1906 edition of Fanny Farmer’s Boston Cooking-School Cook Book. A year later the Walter M. Lowney Company in Boston was looking for ways to increase sales of their chocolate products. They hired Maria Willet Howard to write a series of recipes featuring their chocolate. Published in 1907, Lowney’s Cookbook contained the second published brownie recipe.

Brownies became popular across America beginning in the 1920s. Today a search of the internet can discover over 100,000 brownie recipes. The variations seem endless, containing everything from candy to coffee beans. Take a taste of history and try the original brownie recipes.

Boston Cooking-School Cook Book, 1906

1 cup sugar	¼ cup melted butter
1 egg, unbeaten	2 squares unsweetened chocolate, melted
¾ teaspoon vanilla	½ cup flour
½ cup walnut meats, cut in pieces	

Mix ingredients in order given. Line a seven-inch square pan with paraffin paper. Spread mixture evenly in the pan and bake in a slow oven. As soon as taken from oven turn from pan, remove paper, and cut cake into strips, using a sharp knife. If these directions are not followed paper will cling to cake, and it will be impossible to cut in sharply even pieces.

Notes for the modern cook: We used cooking spray in place of the paraffin paper. Try baking the brownies at 325° for 30 minutes.

Lowney's Brownies - Lowney's Cook Book, 1907

½ cup butter
1 cup sugar
2 squares chocolate
2 eggs
½ cup nut meats
½ cup flour
¼ teaspoon salt

Cream butter, add remaining ingredients, spread on buttered sheets, and bake ten to fifteen minutes. Cut squares as soon as taken from oven.

Notes for modern cook: Our batch took 30 minutes at 325°. The end product is cake-like and slightly less chocolatey.



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