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Cacao vs Cocoa: What's the Difference?



If you buy chocolate, you've likely noticed that some packages say they contain cacao while others say cocoa.

Maybe you've even seen raw cacao powder or cacao nibs in health food stores, leading you to wonder how they differ from standard cocoa powder and chocolate chips.

In some cases, there are important differences between such products. At other times, the only difference may be the marketing lingo chosen by the manufacturers.

This article tells you the difference between cacao and cocoa and which one's healthier.

Terminology

Chocolate is made from cacao beans — or rather seeds — from the *Theobroma cacao* tree. This plant produces large, pod-like fruits, each containing 20–60 beans surrounded by a sticky, sweet-tart white pulp.

The contents of the beans provide the basis for chocolate products. However, there's not complete agreement on when to use the terms cacao and cocoa respectively.

Some experts use "cacao" for the pods, beans and ground-up contents of the beans, reserving "cocoa" for the powder left after pressing the fat out of the ground beans.

Makers of raw (unroasted) or less processed cacao bean products often use the word cacao rather than cocoa, which may imply that they're more natural products.

Bean-to-bar chocolatiers, who make chocolate from scratch starting with fermented, dried beans, only use the word cacao for the pod and beans before they're fermented. After fermentation, they call them cocoa beans.

SUMMARY

Chocolate is made from seeds (beans) in the pod-like fruit of the *Theobroma cacao* tree. Use of "cacao" versus "cocoa" on chocolate products is inconsistent and varies by brand, so don't assume one is better or different than another.

How Cacao Beans Are Processed

The raw beans contained within the sticky matrix of the cacao pod don't taste much like chocolate. Therefore, even raw cacao products aren't made with beans straight from the pod.

Rather, once cacao beans are harvested, they go through several processing steps. In brief, the basic process is:

1. **Fermentation:** The beans (with some sticky pulp still clinging on) are put into bins and covered for a few days so microbes that feed on the pulp can ferment the beans. This starts to develop the distinctive chocolate flavor and aroma.
2. **Drying:** The fermented beans are dried for several days. Once dry, they may be sorted and sold to chocolate makers.

3. **Roasting:** The dried beans are roasted unless a raw product is desired. Roasting more fully develops the chocolate flavor and gives them some sweetness.
4. **Crushing:** The beans are crushed and separated from their outer hulls, resulting in broken cacao pieces called nibs.
5. **Grinding:** Nibs are ground, producing a non-alcoholic liquor. Now it's ready to be made into chocolate products.

To make cocoa powder, the liquor—which is roughly half fat in the form of cocoa butter—is pressed to remove most of the fat.

To make chocolate, the liquor is often mixed with other ingredients, including vanilla, sugar, more cocoa butter and milk.

The percentage of cacao, cocoa or dark chocolate on a candy bar tells you how much combined cocoa powder and cocoa butter are present. The specific proportion of each is generally a trade secret of the manufacturer.

SUMMARY

After harvest, cacao beans are processed to develop flavor and texture. The percentage of cacao, cocoa or dark chocolate listed on a bar generally tells you the total amount of cocoa powder plus cocoa butter.

Nutritional Comparison of Cacao and Cocoa Products

When comparing nutrition labels of products made from cacao beans (whether raw or roasted), the biggest differences you'll see are in the calorie, fat and sugar content.

Here's a look at how 1 ounce (28 grams) of a few cacao products compares:

	Unsweetened Cocoa Powder	Unsweetened Cacao Nibs	Semi-Sweet Chocolate Chips	Dark Chocolate, 70% Cocoa
Calories	64	160	140	160
Fat	3.5 grams	11 grams	8 grams	13 grams
Saturated Fat	2 grams	2.5 grams	5 grams	8 grams
Protein	5 grams	9 grams	1 gram	2 grams
Carbs	16 grams	6 grams	20 grams	14 grams
Added Sugars	0 grams	0 grams	18 grams	9 grams
Fiber	9 grams	3 grams	1 gram	3 grams
Iron	22% of the RDI	4% of the RDI	12% of the RDI	30% of the RDI

Cacao products are excellent sources of several minerals, including selenium, magnesium, chromium and manganese, but these often aren't shown on nutrition labels.

Generally, the darker the chocolate — meaning the higher the cacao content — the higher the mineral content.

Comparing nutrition labels also won't tell you differences in antioxidant content, which can be affected by cacao variety, growing conditions and processing methods.

Generally, less processed cacao to which less heat has been applied — such as raw cacao — contains more antioxidants.

SUMMARY

Cacao products — such as unsweetened cocoa powder, nibs and dark chocolate — are rich sources of minerals.

Minimally processed, raw cacao products contain little or no added sugar and are higher in antioxidants than more highly processed products.

Health Benefits and Risks of Cacao and Cocoa

Cacao beans and the products derived from them are rich sources of beneficial plant compounds, particularly flavanols, which have antioxidant, heart-protective and anti-cancer properties, among other health benefits.

Cacao also contains iron that is readily absorbed by your body, unlike some plant sources of the mineral. Vegetarians and

vegans may especially profit from this, as their sources of iron are limited.

Cacao products also contain tryptophan, which is an amino acid your body uses to make serotonin, a brain chemical that helps you relax.

Despite these benefits, remember that chocolate is high in calories. If you ate an entire 3-ounce (85-gram), 70%-cocoa chocolate bar, you'd gain 480 calories, 24 grams of saturated fat and 27 grams of added sugars.

By choosing dark chocolate and unsweetened cacao products like nibs, you can minimize health risks linked to eating too much sugar, including weight gain and dental decay.

SUMMARY

Cacao products stand out for their disease-fighting plant compounds, easily absorbed iron and relaxation-promoting tryptophan. Still, they can be high in calories (and sometimes sugar), so enjoy them in moderation.

Flavor and Best Uses of Cacao Products

Your choice of cacao products will depend on your taste buds and how you're using the products.

For example, unsweetened cacao nibs are healthier than standard chocolate chips, but you may find them too bitter. Consider mixing the two as you adapt.

As for raw cacao powder, you may find its taste and quality superior to standard unsweetened cocoa powder. However, raw cacao powder generally costs more.

If you buy raw cacao powder, remember that some of its antioxidants will be destroyed by heat if you bake with it. Consider adding it to a smoothie instead.

Try using raw cacao nibs in trail mix or other uncooked creations to avoid destroying antioxidants via heat.

SUMMARY

Less processed, unsweetened and raw cacao products can be bitter, but you may grow accustomed to the flavor. If you buy raw cacao products, understand that baking will destroy some of their rich antioxidants.

The Bottom Line

Use of "cacao" versus "cocoa" on chocolate products is inconsistent.

Generally, raw cacao products — made from fermented, dried, unroasted cacao beans — are less processed and healthier.

Still, standard dark chocolate with at least 70% cocoa is a good source of beneficial antioxidants and minerals.

Therefore, choose the cacao-rich products that best fit your taste buds and budget, but enjoy them in moderation since they're all calorie-dense.

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