

## **PORTUGUESE JEWS – PIONEERS OF COCOA AND VANILLA PRODUCTION IN SOUTH AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (SIXTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES)**

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The Michelin guide book's description of Bayonne in southern France, one of the two main centers of Portuguese Jews in France (the other is Bordeaux),<sup>1</sup> sketches the rue du Port-Neuf ("the street of the New Port") as follows:

It is a pedestrian street with low arcades on its two sides, full of shops selling cakes, pastry, and sweets, famous for its first-class chocolate. Cocoa was introduced in Bayonne from the 17th century by Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal.<sup>2</sup>

A special guide from the Bayonne municipality told us that this city was the birthplace of "La pâtisserie française" (French pastries), thanks to the Portuguese Jews of America who sent their relatives in Bayonne sugar, cocoa, and vanilla.

The first Jews who settled in the Americas were mostly, if not all, of Portuguese origin. To trace their route to the Americas succinctly, we note that the exodus of the Jews expelled from Spain was mainly directed to Portugal, Italy, North Africa, and the Ottoman Empire. The Portuguese Jews who were forcibly converted in 1497 began leaving Portugal in the mid-sixteenth century after the installation of the Inquisition there and continued to do so until the mid-nineteenth century. Looking westward, the exiles were attracted by the prospect of encountering the opportunity for

1 Jews fleeing the persecutions of the Inquisition in Portugal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tried to reach non-Catholic countries to settle in them. On their way to the Netherlands and the Hanseatic cities in Germany and Denmark, some of them were given special permits, "*lettres patentes*," to settle in France with the status of "*marchands Portugais*" (Portuguese merchants). The fact that they were of Jewish origin was not mentioned. Their main concentrations were in Bayonne and Bordeaux.

2 *Guide Michelin — Pyrénées*, 3rd ed. (Clermont Ferrand, n.d.), 66.

new, peaceful lives free of persecution. The Protestant colonizing powers in the Americas – the Netherlands and England – helped them attain that goal, considering those Jews as a very positive element for settlement. The Jews' knowledge of Spanish and Portuguese would be of assistance in relations with the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in America, their commercial acumen would be beneficial to the merchandizing of the tropical products of America, and their better technical skills – compared to the other settlers – would be put to use in establishing plantations in the tropics. Moreover, they also excelled in maintaining good relations with the Indian tribes they found there.

When the English missionary John Oxenbridge joined a group of a hundred English settlers in the 1650s who came then to the unknown territory of Surinam to establish a settlement, he found a Jew, Jacob Enoch, living peacefully with his family among the Indians.<sup>3</sup> His real family name was Mendes Enoch.

When the French tried several times to settle the island of Cayenne (today in French Guyana) from 1631 onwards, their attitude towards the Indians was so tyrannical and cruel that the Indians clashed with them, dispersed them, and drove them out. In 1643, a French company was established in Rouen under the name of Cape North Company, and Charles Ponces, Sieur de Bretigny, sailed to Cayenne with about three hundred people. As was the case with the first attempt, the French colonists quarreled with the Indians and also among themselves, Bretigny being very dictatorial, cruel, and contentious. In 1645 Bretigny was killed by the Indians and the colony dispersed.<sup>4</sup> The Dutch, who replaced them, also suffered from Indian enmity. A group of Jewish colonists, composed mainly of Jewish refugees from Dutch Brazil and a number of Amsterdam Jews, reached Cayenne in September 1660 following a grant given to David Nassy to establish a Jewish settlement there: "David Nassy...obtained the title of Patroon-Master and in 1659 went with a large number [of] his compatriots to Cayenne. In the following year, these were joined by the persons of the same religion who had quit Leghorn."<sup>5</sup> The Dutch governor Jan Classen Lagnendijk prevented them from disembarking. The Indian chiefs working with the Dutch were the ones who pressed the governor to let the Jews

3 John Oxenbridge, *A Seasonable Proposition of Propagating the Gospel by Christian Colonies in the Continent of Guiana* (London, 1667), 7.

4 James Rodway and Thomas Watt, *Chronological History of the Discovery and Settlement of Guiana, 1493–1668* (Georgetown, 1888), 98, 104, 112, 129, 130.

5 Henri Ternaux-Compans, *Notice Historique sur la Guyane Française* (Paris, 1843), 66.

settle. They declared that they knew the Jews were good people and that they were glad to have them come to settle.<sup>6</sup> The Jews took up residence in the exclusive Jewish settlement of Remire, where they freely collaborated with the Indians.

Another example is the narrative of two Jews – Josua Nunez Netto and Joseph Pereira – who came in 1658 to settle on the banks of the Pomeroon River (today the Republic of Guiana, at that time a Dutch colony):

The country is covered by forest that is not too dense and there are some Indian villages upstream. The Indians are very gentle and peace-loving. There was a Jew in a boat with the Indians and we spoke to him in Spanish.<sup>7</sup>

A number of Jews were proficient in the different Arawak dialects, and Jews usually served as translators between the English or Dutch authorities and the Indian tribes. Jews preferred to employ Indians as paid workers rather than use African slaves; they respected their traditional customs, whereas the aim of the European priests who accompanied the colonists was to try to convert them to Christianity, sometimes by force.

Some 50–60 Jewish families lived in the settlement of Pomeroon together with 400 wealthy Indians, expelled from Dutch Brazil, who were working with them. Catholic missionary Jean Baptiste du Tertre, when describing the arrival of the Jews from Dutch Brazil, tells of their being accompanied by “Brazilian savages,” which at that time was a description of Indians.<sup>8</sup> The Indians, who had their own systems of processing cacao and extracting vanilla, kept them secret from the European settlers. They did, however, enable the Jews to learn from them and to modernize the procedures.

Cocoa and vanilla were not well known in Europe at the time, and the market for them was not assured. For that reason the Jews in America began exporting these products to their Portuguese Jewish brethren in Amsterdam,

6 Jac Zwarts, “Een Episode mit de Joodsche Kolonisatie en Guyana 1660,” *West Indische Gids* 9 (1928): 519–30; Notarial Archives, Pieter Pathuysen, 1659, vol. 2888 and vol. 2899, fol. 3344–3355 of 10 May 1660 (the deposition of the captain who brought the Jews to Cayenne).

7 Jaap Meijer, *Pioneers of Pauroma (Pomeroon)* (Paramaribo, 1954), based on the compilation by R. Bjilmsa, *Archief der Nederlandse Portageesh-Israelitische Gemeente in Suriname* (The Hague, 1920), 23–24.

8 Samuel Oppenheim, “Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 16 (1909): 130, citing the *American Historical Review* of Oct. 1900; Jean Baptiste du Tertre, *Histoire generale des Antilles habitues par les Francais* (Paris: T. Jolly, 1667), 492.

Hamburg, Bayonne, and Bordeaux and had them promote this merchandise.

The real pioneer of cacao growing and processing was Benjamin d'Acosta de Andrade. Born as a *converso* in Portugal, he returned to Judaism in Dutch Brazil. Upon the Portuguese occupation of this Dutch colony, he reached Martinique in 1654 with a group of Jews. There he became the owner of two of the biggest sugar plants. He is known and remembered for establishing the first cacao processing plant in French territory with expertise acquired from the Indians. Cocoa production had begun in Spanish colonies in America, mainly in Mexico, and the drink derived there was called *chocolate*. But it was d'Acosta who perfected and modernized the process. He experimented in producing pills of cacao, calling them chocolate.

At first the European public did not receive chocolate well, and the customs duties levied on it were very high. Over the years the consumption of chocolate increased and by 1684 more and more processing plants were erected in Martinique, mainly owned by Jews who were those who had the technology. Chocolate became the island's most important export. Benjamin d'Acosta, however, could not benefit from its progress, owing to developments that resulted in the "Code Noire" (the Black Code), which stipulated the expulsion of the Jews from all the French islands.

In 1664, with growing profits from the Caribbean colonies, Jean Baptiste Colbert, the French chief minister, founded the "Compagnie des Indes Occidentales" (Company of the West Indies) in Paris. Under the new regulations all commerce had to be transferred into French hands and be conducted only with France, instead of with Amsterdam, the Jews' main contact. The Jews were forced to take French partners as primary owners.<sup>9</sup> In 1685, the "Black Code" came into force. The Jesuit fathers had always pressed for the expulsion of the Jews, accusing them of bringing Judaism to the French colonies. Under pressure, Louis XIV finally signed the edict. The Jews of Martinique left for the Dutch island of Curaçao. The cocoa plants passed into French hands, usually to the French partner who gave the Jews no compensation whatsoever, as nobody defended the property of the expelled Jews.

In general the Jews of the Caribbean and the Guianas concentrated on the raising, refining, and export of sugar. On the English islands of Barbados and Jamaica, the local English colonists did everything possible to prevent the Jews from monopolizing sugar production. Thus, special local

9 Jean Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage au Isles de l'Amerique* (Paris: G. Cavelier, 1722), 6:3.

legislation was introduced stipulating that Jews could not employ Christians, which meant they could not employ indentured servants (prisoners released from English prisons on condition that they work in the colonies), nor could they employ slaves who were usually converted to Christianity on arrival in America – Jews could not hold more than two slaves in Jamaica or more than one in Barbados (if they were not Christian).

This situation forced the Jews to look for less labor-intensive plantations that called for more specialization in production. Since sugar plantations required a great deal of labor to pick and process the sugar cane, they turned to cacao and vanilla, which called for much less manpower. Economic studies of that period show that the Jews of Jamaica had apparently secured a monopoly of the vanilla trade by 1655. This trade was closely connected with Jews of Amsterdam and Barbados.<sup>10</sup>

Chocolate gradually became one of the popular drinks of Restoration England,<sup>11</sup> and cacao became the principal attraction for the populating Jamaica by 1708.<sup>12</sup> The main result was that by applying the right specialized methods, cacao and vanilla could be as lucrative as sugar.<sup>13</sup> In the words of Richard Blome, a contemporary historian: “It earned prodigious profit with little trouble.”<sup>14</sup> The Jews of Suriname, Cayenne, and Pomeroon followed suit, especially those who lacked the capital to invest in sugar growing and refining and were reluctant to employ manpower.

Extraction of vanilla was kept as a Jewish secret for quite a while, as is obvious from the correspondence between the Dutch commander of Essequibo and Pomeroon and the Dutch West India Company. The letter by Commander Beekman of Essequibo and Pomeroon to Amsterdam, dated 31 March 1684, is very illustrative of the Jewish role in vanilla production:

The Jew Salomon de la Roche having died some 8 to 9 months ago, the trade in vanilla has come to an end, since no one here knows how to prepare it, so as to develop proper aroma and keep it from spoiling. I have not heard of any this whole year. Little is found here. Most of it is found in Pomeroon, whither this Jew frequently traveled, and he

10 Stephen Alexander Fortune, *Merchants and Jews: The Struggle for British West Indian Commerce 1650–1750* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 84.

11 Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh, *No Peace Beyond the Line: The English in the Caribbean 1624–1690* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 285.

12 Ibid., 286.

13 Fortune, *Merchants and Jews*, 84.

14 Richard Blome, *A Description of the Island of Jamaica, with other Isles and Territories in America in Which English are Related* (London: T. Mibourne, 1672), 15–21.

sometimes used to make me a present of a little. In navigating along the river, I have sometimes seen some on the trees and picked with my own hands, and it was prepared by the Jew.... I shall do my best to obtain for the company as much as shall be feasible, but I am afraid it will spoil, since I do not know how to prepare it.

In response to this letter, Beekman received a reproof on 21 August 1684:

...As to the vanilla trade, which we recommend you carry on for the company, where you answer us saying this trade has come to an end through the death of a Jew, Salomon de la Roche...a meager and poor excuse.<sup>15</sup>

Another piece of evidence of the Jewish secret for the preparation of vanilla is what was written by Jean Baptiste Labat, a French missionary in Martinique:

In the middle of 1699, a Jew who inherited Benjamin d'Acosta, came from Curaçao to ask for the money due to his relative. He said that he had traveled on the coast of South America, and he knew how to prepare vanilla extract. I begged him to teach me how the Indians prepared the vanilla, how to dry it, and how to have the extract. I observed exactly the way he showed me and tried several times to prepare [it] with no results. I concluded that maybe the vanilla in Martinique was different from the one in Cayenne. But I think he had deluded me. It is not extraordinary to this sort of people.<sup>16</sup>

The English Caribbean authorities, anxious to have exclusivity in sugar production in the West Indies, initiated a series of attacks on Dutch sugar-producing settlements, destroying them as well as the plantations. One of those devastated settlements was the flourishing Jewish settlement of Pomeroon, ravaged in 1666. This, along with expulsion of the Jews from the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1685, led to a large concentration of Jews in Curaçao.

Jewish knowledge of cacao processing made the island a center of cacao production. What were needed were cacao beans. The Spanish, Creole, and Indian inhabitants of Venezuela regularly crossed the narrow stretch of water to Curaçao to shop for supplies, paying with cacao beans. Even Spain

15 Mordechai Arbell, "The Jewish Settlement in Pomeroon/Pauroma (Guyana) 1657–1666," *Revue des Études Juives* 154, no. 3–4 (July–December 1995): 359–60; quoted from *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 16 (1907): 157–59.

16 Labat, *Nouveau voyage*, 6:106.

itself, cut off from her overseas empire due to lack of ships, was purchasing the recently discovered delicacy, cocoa, from Amsterdam; it had been processed in Curaçao where it had been acquired, in turn, from the northern coast of South America – Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador.<sup>17</sup>

The relatively small island of Curaçao was overpopulated by Jews, who became the majority of the white population. An important part of the Curaçao economy was the import and processing of tropical produce from the neighboring Spanish colonies, and re-exporting it to Europe. Some of the Jews had to emigrate to the source of this produce.

The cantor (Hebrew: *hazan* – singer leading the prayers) of Curaçao, Joseph Corcos, wrote that “in 1693, a number of Israelites left Curaçao for Venezuela. The majority of these were from Leghorn. They went to Tucacas, where they established and formed themselves into a congregation.”<sup>18</sup> The strange thing was that the Jews established a congregation, “Santa Irmandad,” in Spanish territory. Those Leghorn Jews were originally from Pomeroon, spoke Spanish, and were well aware of the danger of Spanish attacks. Tucacas was located between two rivers forming a delta on each side of which was a Dutch warship guarding them. The objective of these Jews was to make large-scale purchases of cacao beans and send them to Curaçao for processing.

The governor of Caracas, José Francisco de Canas, reported to the king of Spain in 1720:

[Tucacas] became a major center of smuggling to the people in the valleys of Barquisimientto, Barinas, Turiano, Coro, and even including Santa Fe (Bogotá) and Quito. The Jews participate actively in this settlement where they have built houses, raised cattle, constructed a fortress, and even a synagogue.<sup>19</sup>

The mayor of Coro, Juan Jacobo Montero de Espinos, wrote to the king about Tucacas’ commerce in 1711: “Twelve thousand bales of cacao grown in the Venezuelan valleys were exported...and the exporters come themselves to Tucacas to purchase what they need.”<sup>20</sup> He added, moreover,

17 Cornelius Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and the Guianas, 1680–1791* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 340.

18 Joseph Corcos, *A Synopsis of the History of the Jews of Curaçao* (Curaçao: Impr. de la Liberia, 1897), 16–18.

19 Archivo General de Indias, Document 759 of 1720 (Santo Domingo).

20 Montero to the King, 9 April 1711, Archivo General de Indias, Document 697 (Santo Domingo).

that he had arranged the attack and seizure of several mule trains carrying cacao beans to the Jews of Tucacas. The Tucacas enclave was under the command of Jorge Christian who held the title of “Marquis of Tucacas.” He was replaced by the Jew Samuel Hebreo who bore the title of “Señor de las Tucacas.”<sup>21</sup>

After a number of unsuccessful attempts, the Jewish settlement was finally captured by the *visitador* (inspector) Pedro José de Olivarriaga in November 1720. The Jews left before the arrival of the Spanish army. A witness, Captain Bacilio Antonio de Cuebas wrote: “On the coast were more than forty ships which left with the arrival of Olivarriaga. [The Jews] burned the houses they had built in Tucacas.”<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding these events, after the destruction of Tucacas the Jews continued purchasing beans. Governor Portales, on a tour of the Venezuelan coast, reported in January 1722: “Jews are not only doing business on the coast, but they are present at the fairs in January and July, when cacao beans are collected, sleeping in farms and in valleys, and local women sleep with them. There is lack of textiles and other merchandise [which they bring].”<sup>23</sup>

If landing on the coast was dangerous, commerce was carried out by sham battles in Venezuelan waters during which Curaçao “pirates” would “seize” the cacao from the Venezuelan captain, paying him in goods. The Spanish ambassador in The Hague complained in 1741 that Venezuelan cacao via Curaçao could be more cheaply obtained in Holland than in Spain.<sup>24</sup> In the years 1750–1774 Amsterdam received 5,262,870 pounds of cacao from the West Indies. From the small island of St. Eustatius alone, in 1779 Jews exported:

To the Netherlands	422,770 pounds of cacao
To North America	15,220 pounds of cacao. <sup>25</sup>

Venezuela was not the only place under Spanish rule where Jews purchased cacao beans. Jews from Jamaica frequented the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica from the end of the seventeenth century. The citizens of Cartago, then Costa Rica’s main city, had cacao plantations in the region of Barra de Matina and

21 Celestino Andres Arausz Monfante. *El contrabando holandés en el Caribe durante la primer mitad del siglo XVIII* (Caracas, 1984), 199.

22 Archivo General de Indias, Document 179, 8 October 1727, pp. 656–68.

23 Portales to the King, 29 January 1722, Archivo General de Indias, Document 759 (Santo Domingo).

24 Goslinga, *Dutch*, 202, citing Oud Archief, Curaçao 804, p. 60

25 J. Hartog, *History of St. Eustatius* (Aruba: Central U.S.A. Bicentennial Committee of the Netherlands Antilles, 1976), 39, 216–19.



twice a year held special fairs that coincided with the cacao harvest. A report from Cartago to the Capitan General in Guatemala describes the situation in 1744:

On the confluence of the Barra, illegal commerce was carried out to such an extent that Jamaican Jews erected tents on the land and kept their merchandise in them, and the citizens of Cartago would come to the fair twice a year to sell cacao and went to the seashore to purchase textiles and then brought them to the city.<sup>26</sup>

Another place from which Jews of Jamaica and Curaçao obtained their supply of cacao for processing was the region of the French colony Haiti called “Fond de Negres.” In 1713 a thriving community of free black farmers had taken root in this fertile region and a substantial amount of the cacao grown there was exported as contraband to the Jews of Jamaica and Curaçao.<sup>27</sup> This commerce was short-lived owing to a pest that exterminated the cacao plantations.<sup>28</sup>

What remains today of this Jewish specialization in vanilla and cacao can be seen in Malvina Liebman’s cookbook, *Jewish Cookery from Boston to Baghdad*,<sup>29</sup> in which we find the Pomeroon mousse pie prepared with chocolate, vanilla extract, and almonds.

26 Luis Diaz Navarro, “Informes sobre la Provincia de Costa Rica, presentado al Capitán General de Guatemala en 1744,” *Revista de Archivos Nacionales (Costa Rica)* 3, no. 11–12 (Sept.–Oct. 1939): 583.

27 Gregorio de Robles, *América a fines del siglo XVII: Noticia de los lugares de contrabando*, (Valladolid: Casa-Museo de Colón y Seminario Americanista de la Universidad, 1980), 32–36.

28 Mederic Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de partie française de l’isle de Saint Domingue* (Paris: Société française d’histoire d’outre-mer, 1984), 1197–99.

29 Malvina Liebman, *Jewish Cookery from Boston to Baghdad*, (Miami: E.A. Seamann, 1975), 214–25.