

The background features several cacao beans on the left, some whole and some cut open to show the white pulp and seeds. On the right, there is a small pile of cacao powder next to a cut bean. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of brown, orange, and yellow. The title is written in a large, elegant, cursive font.

# Ritual Nourishment with Cacao

**To the ancient Maya, this seed was sacred. Still consumed in ceremony today, it holds benefits for the body, mind, and soul.**

*By Merrill Page*



**F**ood holds a power I once believed was enough to satiate all my desires. The textures, tones, flavors, nutrient profiles, temperatures, and my felt experience of each have driven my passion for learning for as long as I can remember. I can enter an entire culture and landscape simply through my relationship to its food, how it is grown, harvested, prepared, and shared.

There are places inside me that still grieve the days when I transitioned from girl to woman and was told I may no longer eat whatever I wanted. New diets came with having to sit still, be quiet, look people in the eye, and defer to others I didn't respect. The landscape of adulthood was never as rich as my hungry and well-fed days of childhood.

Thirty-five years later, now schooled and articulate in multiple forms of food and womanhood as well as how one begins to make peace with both, I seek nourishment

in subtle layers and feel compelled to find language to express them. Lately, I have been dreaming up a new vision for rest and restoration that nourishes me as much as the women who come to be nourished. I'm calling it "Ritual Nourishment," a future retreat.

## *Opening Space*

This week though, the retreat came to me. I found an email in my inbox from Leslie, my cranial client, a former physician who has given up mainstream medicine to embrace being both a cancer coach and a "ritual alchemist." She also leads groups to India for Panchakarma, an Ayurvedic approach to detoxifying and purifying the body. It resolves illness on multiple layers: mind, body, and spirit.

"Merrill, I'm hosting a cacao ceremony Sunday morning. I would love if you could come," the email said.



I closed it right away and pretended I didn't see it—that it didn't exist. After all, this was my weekend with all four of my boys: a movie Friday night in Fairfax, two games in separate towns on Saturday morning, a visit to the veterinarian with our new puppy on Saturday afternoon, and Little League plus Mikey's birthday party in the city on Sunday! No, I'm full, thank you. There is no room for more. But Sunday morning ...

This is how the conversation in my head went—riddled with reasons why I couldn't go as well as reasons why I needed to be there. Cacao, the seed from which cocoa and chocolate are made, is the mother of deep nourishment, considered sacred by the Maya. When held in ritual and ceremony, it offers the opportunity to drop in and be fed in ways we've only dreamed of.

Medicinally, Leslie explains, it's loaded with magnesium, iron, and other minerals, as well as flavanols, theobromine, and theophylline to sooth and balance the cardiovascular system and heal the lungs. It calms the nervous system, improves brain function, lowers blood sugar, and can support weight loss. Not to mention it has chemical properties that stimulate the "bliss" hormones in your body to make you feel good, she adds.

In ritual, it becomes a tonic for the soul, inviting us not just into the biomechanical aspects of cacao as nourishing food and drink, but also into the bio-spiritual ones. It touches the space *beyond* the physical and into the metaphysical planes. It impacts how we work as well as who we are. You and me as metaphor. These are the realms of shamanic healing, the kind I am *always* hungry for.

## *Ritual Cacao*

So I slipped out of the morning-at-home routine on Sunday and walked down the bike path to the studio space behind a wellness and women's clothing boutique called Citrine. I arrived five minutes early to find the space set: a circle of seats on the ground around an altar alight with candles, alive with flowers, anchored with bars of ritual cacao, and adorned with a deck of tarot-inspired cards. It was ceremonial space, playful and intriguing. Sitting at the edge, Leslie glowed in her role as priestess, her husband beside her.

Beneath the stage of the altar another garden blossomed. This one held water, stones, and an empty bowl, suggesting more mystery in the ritual. The theme, she had stated, was Covid and its impact on our lives, including grief and the many layers and complexity created during these past years that suggest it is time to

grieve. "Though I'm afraid I may have scared a few people off when I mentioned that word!" she said laughing.

After introductions and Leslie's explanation of cacao's medicinal properties, we got to hear about its magic. "It makes you want to dance or sleep, because it takes you, carries you, to where you need to go," she tells us. This is plant medicine. Whole and intact it serves as a salve that reaches into the whole of you and offers you what you need. In herbal medicine, we call it an adaptogen.

"Ask yourself what it is you need to release," she went on, "and we'll shake it loose." When we find the courage to feel the depth of sadness just waiting to be felt, when we let it express and move out of us, we free that space up again. And now there's room for possibility. If we drop a little deeper still, and wake up in present time, we may even find joy.

"It's complex, isn't it? There are so many layers and pieces, and they are all true. That's why we are here. That's why we have ritual," she said in a melodious, watery tone that began to transport us into the sacred space of just feeling it all.

Music helped lead the way. Music and movement and meditation, paired with the artful preparation of pure cacao. We drank it together, then moved together to the tide of Leslie's voice into meditation, then into dancing and shaking, a practice she drew from the ancient study of medical qigong to help release energy.

We completed the ceremony by placing our hands on the stones and letting our woes drop down out of us and into our rock. Then each of us placed our stone into the empty bowl and poured water over it. We took this water outside to feed the roots of a nearby tree.

These sorts of rituals do not translate easily into the urban lifestyle or the modern mind. They require some suspension of disbelief. Most miracles do—they ask us to shift out of rationale and into the possibility of something bigger holding us, guiding us. Your participation is essential in remaking your heart new. This is the heart of ritual, and the invitation.

I slipped out two hours later, just as the circle was closing, to make my way home along the bike path. And some hours later when I opened my computer to officially respond to Leslie's "call," here's what I had to say: "Leslie, I am transformed by our (brief) time together. Wow. The peace feels so deep. The openness and gentleness I brought home is all I could have wished for."

Call it cacao or Sunday morning prayer, the morning off or ritual with a doctor who now calls herself a ceremonial alchemist. It was, no doubt, ritual nourishment. 🌿