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Sweet! Celebrate with natural and sugar-free desserts

Better Nutrition

By Ayn Nix

With the variety of sugar alternatives on the market, you can now have your cake—or sugar-free chocolate ganache—and eat it too. The best part is these sweet-tooth temptations are diabetic- and figure-friendly, and have the added benefit of superfood ingredients like walnuts and flax.

Saying good-bye to sugar doesn't have to mean denying your sweet tooth—or settling for the chemical aftertaste and harmful side effects of artificial sweeteners. After reading up on these top-selling natural sweeteners, turn the page and try them out with recipes you have to taste to believe.

AGAVE SYRUP

What it is: Derived from the sap of Mexico's agave cactus.

Taste: Sweeter than honey and sugar.

Health benefits: Agave syrup is low-glycemic food and doesn't stimulate digestive insulin secretion, which makes it ideal for diabetics.

How to bake with it: Use 1/3 cup agave syrup for 1 cup sugar.

Product example: Wholesome Sweeteners' Organic Raw Blue Agave Syrup

ERYTHRITOL

What it is: A sugar alcohol that comes in granulated and powdered forms and occurs naturally in fruit, mushrooms, and fermented products like soy sauce.

Taste: 60 to 70 percent as sweet as sugar with a slight cooling effect in the mouth.

Health benefits: Erythritol, which has a minimal effect on blood sugar, has zero calories, and is low in carbs. It also doesn't tend to produce intestinal distress like other sugar alcohols.

How to cook with it: Use in place of sugar. It can be used in baking, although it doesn't caramelize like sugar.

Product example: Zsweet All-Natural Sweetener

MAPLE SYRUP

What it is: Made by reducing sap from maple trees and then boiled until much of the water has evaporated.

Taste: About twice as sweet as sugar.

Health benefits: Maple syrup contains minerals, including potassium, calcium, magnesium, and manganese, in addition to vitamins, and amino acids.

How to bake with it: Use 3/4 cup maple syrup in place of 1 cup sugar, and reduce liquids in recipes by 3 tablespoons.

Product example: Coombs Family Farms Organic Maple Syrup

STEVIA

What it is: A South American herb native to Paraguay

Taste: 200 times sweeter than sugar

Health benefits: A no-calorie sweetener that can be used by diabetics without raising blood sugar or affecting glucose.

How to bake with it: Use 1-1/2 tablespoons powdered (or 1 teaspoon liquid) stevia for 1 cup sugar.

Product example: SweetLeaf SteviaClear Liquid Stevia

SUCANAT

What it is: Sucanat is shortened for of “sugar cane natural,” made by extracting the juice from sugar cane, reducing it to a syrup, then hand-paddling it to preserve the natural molasses.

Taste: It has a light molasses flavor and a rich, sweet taste.

Health benefits: Contains calcium, vitamin A, niacin, riboflavin, thiamin, iron, vitamin B6, zinc, and magnesium.

How to bake with it: Use in the same ratio as brown or white sugar.

Product example: Wholesome Sweeteners’ Organic Trade Sucanat

XYLITOL

What it is: A sugar alcohol found in certain fruits, vegetables, and grains.

Taste: Xylitol looks and tastes like sugar. Like many other sugar alcohols, it has a cooling effect in the mouth. It has almost no aftertaste.

Health benefits: Xylitol has about 40 percent fewer calories than sugar. It is absorbed more slowly than sugar, and is very low on the glycemic index—great for diabetics. In addition, it does not contribute to tooth decay and may actually repair minor cavities. Newer research shows it may have potential as a treatment for osteoporosis.

How to bake with it: Xylitol is interchangeable with sugar, for the most part. However, since yeast cannot metabolize it, xylitol will not work when baking bread or anything containing yeast. It does not crystallize like sugar, so it’s not a good choice for making any type of hard candy.

Product example: NOW Foods’ 100% Xylitol

Pumpkin Pots de Soymilk

Serves 6

Nutrient and amino acid-rich maple syrup lends richness to this unique dessert, while sweet curry adds a dash of exotic spice. For a more traditional dessert, replace curry powder with 2 teaspoons of prepared pumpkin pie spice.

1-1/2 cups soymilk

1 vanilla bean, split and scraped

4 eggs

2 tsp. sweet curry powder, such as Penzeys

1 tsp. cinnamon

1/4 tsp. salt

3/4 cup canned pumpkin puree

1/2 cup maple syrup

1. Preheat oven to 325F.
2. Combine soymilk and vanilla bean and seeds in small saucepan, and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat, and allow mixture to steep 15 minutes. Strain to remove large vanilla bean pieces. Whisk eggs, curry powder, cinnamon, and salt in medium bowl. Slowly whisk soymilk mixture into egg mixture. Divide among 6 4-oz. ramekins.
3. Set ramekins inside large roasting pan. Pour warm water into roasting pan to come three-quarters of the way up sides of ramekins.
4. Place pan in oven and bake 50-60 minutes, or until knife inserted into center of Pots de Soymilk comes out moist without egg bits clinging to it.

PER SERVING: 163 CAL; 7.3G PROT; 5G TOTAL FAT (1.3 SAT FAT); 24G CARB; 141G CHOL; 182G SOD; 2.1G FIBER; 17G SUGARS