

SWEET CHOICES

NATURALLY



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If you are supposed to avoid processed sugar, you are fortunate that there are quite a few natural sweeteners out on the market that you can cook with and taste good.

Some that you might be familiar with are:

Xylitol (pronounced zy-li-tall) is often seen in gum, candy and dental products because of its documented benefits to teeth and gums. It can be used as a replacement for sugar in baking, but it is a little moister than sugar and slightly sweeter, so I typically use a little less xylitol when I replace sugar in a recipe. The glycemic index is low (7) so it is safe for diabetics. It also helps to kill fungus in the body so it can be used topically (soaking for athletes foot), or internally (as a douche, in a nasal spray/nettie pot, or internally to kill fungus organisms). It also has a laxative effect for some people, which for many is a positive thing to help keep their bowels moving effectively. Historically xylitol has been made from both corn cobs (the wood of the corncob) and birch trees. You can still purchase both, but most people prefer to purchase their xylitol from the U.S. manufacturers that make it from birch trees. Xylitol is a sugar alcohol and is for human consumption, not pets. Because it kills fungus/yeast so well, it won't work well in recipes that need yeast to rise.

Agave Nectar is also quite popular now. Made from the agave plant that is a member of the lily family and related to the aloe plant. It is popular in raw (means it has been heated but to no more than 116 degrees) and cooked forms, as well as dark and lighter forms. The darker agave has more minerals and a richer flavor than the lighter agave. Agave is tasty for cooking, in beverages and on top of pancakes or hot cereal. It is less than sugar on the glycemic index, but because contains fructose it isn't the best substitute for diabetics or other people concerned with lowering their blood sugar.

Stevia is gaining popularity. It is very safe for diabetics as it is 0 on the glycemic index and has 0 calories. Some people think that stevia has a bitter aftertaste. What many people don't realize is that there are a variety of stevia manufacturers and each tastes different from the next. Unless you have tried each brand, you won't know what you are missing. Stevia comes in powders, liquids and can be difficult to cook with unless you have a cookbook that discusses how to use it effectively as it won't replace the bulk of the sugar in your recipes. It is good in tea and comes in many flavors, root beer & grape (which we put in our club soda to make healthy soda's) and chocolate which is very tasty in your favorite alternative milk (I love chocolate flavored stevia coconut milk – yum!). Stevia also comes in flavored powders which are fun to use to make healthy "Kool-Aid", popsicles, or "Jell-o."

Some other natural sweeteners that you might not be as familiar with are:

Palm (coconut) Nectar is naturally very low on the Glycemic Index (35). Organic evaporated palm sugar has a nutritional content far greater than all other commercially available sweeteners — with high amounts of potassium, magnesium, zinc, iron, nitrogen, phosphorus, chlorine, sulfur and other micronutrients as well as vitamin C and many of the B vitamins. Palm sugar can be used as a 1:1 substitute for cane sugar. It looks similar to brown sugar but is dryer in texture. It rapidly dissolves into liquids and wet dough making it perfect for just about any application. Coconut sugar is made by evaporating the coconut sap, which is hand-harvested by traditional sugar farmers who climb high into the canopy of coconut palms to slice the blossoms from their stems and collect the sweet nectar. The collected nectar is then kettle-boiled into a thick caramelly syrup, dried, and ground into crystals.

Erythritol (pronounced ah-rith-ra-tall), like xylitol, will not caramelize when baking so your baked goods may seem dryer. In addition, erythritol is not as sweet as sugar, so I always put what the recipe calls for when replacing sugar with erythritol so you can assure the bulk will be the same as sugar, and it is nice for some to not have quite such as strong sweetness as pure sugar. There are many products available now that have erythritol as a sweetener including chocolate candy bars and drinks.

Lo Han is a fruit out of China that comes in small shakers and packets. I have seen it recently in some candied products and it is good sprinkled on fruit or cereal, or in beverages. It is safe for diabetics as it is close to 0 on the glycemic index. It would be pretty pricey to bake with, but I have used it to make some cookie bars with good success. It has a nice mild sweetness that most people like, and it is fairly affordable.

Lacuma is a native to Peru and is high in minerals and vitamins such as carotenes and vitamin B3. This powdered fruit is popular in Europe and South America used mostly in ice cream flavoring. I have used it to make gluten free "Tootsie Rolls" that are pretty tasty. It is a much creamier sweetener that would be good in smoothies or when making desserts that require a creaminess to them.

There are also several sweeteners on the market with fiber and pre-biotics. Yes you read that correctly. The fiber used most often is from chicory root. Chicory has been used in the past as a coffee substitute, but it is now often seen as the ingredient inulin, a carbohydrate extracted from the plant used to make fructose and a pre-biotic that nourishes the good bacteria in the intestines. Some sweetener products contain mixtures of the inulin and other natural sweeteners as the industry works to find the best tasting, least expensive, and lowest glycemic product that everyone will like. Each of these products tastes different from the rest, and it really is a matter of opinion which tastes best as everyone's taste buds and texture requirements are different.

Yacon Syrup is a fairly new sweetener on the market. It is grown in the Andes by the Inca descendents and is considered in Brazil to be an anti-diabetic. It is related to the sunflower and has large succulent roots that have a juicy watermelon flavor. It is produced similar to maple syrup and has a taste compared to molasses or caramelized sugar. It can be used in baking or to replace honey or maple syrup. Yacon is high in FOS (fructooligosaccharides), also known as oligofructose or oligofructan which is a class of oligosaccharides (means few sugars) used as alternative sweeteners. Because the body cannot process FOS, it passes through the system without leaving behind absorbable sugar compounds. FOS is relatively low in calories, compared to most other sweeteners. FOS also contains and promotes healthy bacteria that aid in cleaning the colon and regulating the digestive system.

Regardless of which sweetener you choose, have fun experimenting with bringing new healthy sweetness into your life. *Kasara D'Elene is a Master Herbalist, Yuen Practitioner and health educator that owns TruHealth in Mill Creek, WA. You can learn more about her at www.truhealth.com or 425-415-8410.*