THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

TO

PALEO SWEETENERS

THE LOWDOWN ON THE SWEET STUFF—WHICH OPTIONS QUALIFY AS PALEO, THEIR PROS AND CONS, AND HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR SWEET TREATS

by Ashleigh VanHouten

Sweeteners are a divisive topic in the Paleo community. While most don't see anything wrong with the occasional piece of fruit, there are many who think the use of added sweeteners of any kind is unnecessary and harmful and should be avoided at all costs. While Paleo wisdom tells us we certainly don't "need" added sweeteners in our lives, most of us—especially when starting out on our healthy-eating journey—crave a treat every now and then.

While the ultimate goal may be to avoid sugar altogether, many of us look for ways to incorporate the occasional dessert in a way that doesn't interfere with our health or our enjoyment of life.

Good news: There are ways to create desserts that can be more nourishing and less harmful, depending on your goals and nutritional challenges. It's best to experiment and see what works for you by trying out different recipes and paying attention to how they make you feel, with the aim of using as little added sugar as possible, and keeping in mind that even Paleo treats are just that—*treats*. And as such should be enjoyed in moderation on our ongoing pursuit of optimal health.

SUGAR, GLYCEMIC LOAD, AND WHY IT MATTERS

When you eat carbohydrates, your digestive system breaks down the digestible carbs into sugar, which then enters the blood (this is why you might have heard the phrase "all carbs are sugar"). As blood-sugar levels rise, your pancreas produces insulin, a hormone that prompts cells to use blood sugar for energy. As your cells absorb blood sugar, levels in the bloodstream begin to fall—which may result in energy crashes, mood swings, and the desire to eat more carbs or sugar. A carbohydrate's *glycemic index* (GI) is a numerical measure of how rapidly that carbohydrate turns into sugar.

***Glycemic load* (GL)**, which does involve a carbohydrate's GI, presents a more complete picture by also taking into account *how much* of that carbohydrate is present in a serving of a particular food. In general, a glycemic load of 20 or more is high, 11 to 19 is medium, and 10 or under is low.

For some perspective: 1 tablespoon of raw honey has a GL of 10; 1 tablespoon of pure maple syrup has a GL of 8 (but so does fake maple syrup); and stevia has a GL of zero. Chicken, eggs, and meat of any kind also have a GL of zero, while a banana has 10 and a skin-on baked potato has a whopping 17.

These numbers help explain why many people find a diet lower in sugar and carbs, and higher in whole foods like meat, high-quality fats, and non-starchy vegetables helps them stay at an even energy level throughout the day. If you don't allow your blood sugar to spike, you won't get the resultant sugar crashes and hangry mood swings.

While Robb Wolf's book, *Wired to Eat*, explains that individual blood-sugar levels may vary in response to certain carb sources depending on a host of factors (activity level, stress level, individual food tolerances, etc.), it's helpful to know that fiber-rich, low-sugar foods will affect your blood sugar less, and that all sources of sugar—even the "better" ones—are going to raise your levels, often significantly.

Now that we know a bit more about why sugar should be minimized, here's a breakdown of some of the commonly used Paleo(ish) sweeteners. Ironically, most of these alternatives are actually much sweeter than white sugar, meaning you can use much less.

MONK FRUIT
(OR LUO HAN GUO)

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Monk fruit, a plant originally found in China, can be processed into a rich, molasses-like sweetener by removing the seeds and skin, crushing the fruit, and collecting the juice—it's often processed into a powdered form for commercial consumption. And it is noncaloric. You'll see monk fruit listed as a sweetening agent in many healthier or Paleo treat options, like bars and cookies. Interestingly, monk fruit's sweetness is due to the presence of antioxidants called mogrosides, not natural sugars, which means it tastes different from most sweeteners. It's also 150 to 200 times sweeter than sugar, so be sure to experiment when deciding how much to use. Be careful when shopping; look to avoid monk fruit mixed with sweeteners like corn syrup.

GREEN LEAF STEVIA

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Stevia is a concentrated extract from the leaves of the stevia plant—and it's more than 300 times sweeter than table sugar! Unfortunately, the stevia available at most supermarkets is highly processed, and sold in powder, liquid-extract, and crystallized forms—all of which should be avoided (and don't tend to taste very good). Thankfully it's also available in a less-sweet and least-processed form—the dried leaves of the plant itself, which you can find online and in some health-food stores (or grow yourself).

COCONUT SUGAR
(OR COCONUT PALM SUGAR)

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Coconut sugar is produced from the concentrated sap of the coconut flower. It requires 7 to 8 gallons of raw sap to produce 1 gallon of coconut nectar, and the concentrated product has a caramel-like flavor. It is a source of potassium, magnesium, zinc, iron, and vitamin B. The coconut sap from which coconut sugar is derived contains amino acids, which may help build muscle and boost the immune system. It also contains a fiber called inulin, which may slow glucose absorption. It's worth noting, of course, that you'd have to eat a lot of coconut sugar in order to satisfy your requirement for the nutrients and antioxidants it contains—not something we'd advise. Look for an organic version labeled "100% pure coconut sugar."

MAPLE SYRUP

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Maple syrup is made by processing and heating the sap of maple trees, evaporating the water from the liquid to form a concentrate. Maple syrup was first collected and used by indigenous peoples of North America—and today, the Canadian province of Quebec is by far the largest producer, responsible for 70 percent of the world's output, while Vermont produces about 6 percent of the global supply. Maple syrup contains small amounts of zinc, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, and copper, plus high amounts of manganese—of course, you can also get manganese from other Paleo sources like beef liver, nuts, mussels, and spinach.

Be careful: There are plenty of high-fructose-corn syrup products masquerading as maple syrup at grocery stores. Watch for terms like "maple-flavored syrup" and check the ingredients list—if it says anything other than "maple syrup" (like corn syrup or food coloring) you aren't getting the real thing. Your best bet is to buy from a local producer (extra points if you live in Quebec or Vermont!).

HONEY

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Talk about Paleo: A cave painting discovered in Spain suggests that humans have been beekeeping as early as 8,000 years ago. Raw, unprocessed honey—while twice as sweet as sugar—is also a superfood: In addition to the familiar fructose and glucose, honey contains other sugars called oligosaccharides, which can help to feed your gut flora and have a positive effect on your digestive system. Honey is also a source of polyphenols, which are antioxidants found in a number of other foods that may reduce the risk of heart disease and other illnesses. Known as a natural antibiotic, our ancestors used honey as a topical antiseptic to prevent open wounds from becoming infected, and many people use honey to defend against sore throats, recover from colds, and boost weakened immune systems.

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