



THE COOKING SERIES: SWEETENERS

Living on a farm in Ireland, I baked *constantly* growing up. My city friends will make fun of me but on any given day I would whip together 4 or 5 cakes to make sure all of the workmen on the farm were well nourished and fed! I have always believed that **quality ingredients** are the secret to cooking and baking. Fresh, natural, tasty ingredients will make any dish taste good.

First, what is **refined sugar**? The sugar cane plant contains tons of vitamins and minerals, however when it is refined into “sugar” as we commonly know it today all of these nutrients are extracted. The nutritious sugar cane plant basically turns in to “refined sugar” with no minerals or vitamins and “molasses” which contains the extracted minerals and vitamins (this is why blackstrap molasses is such a good source of calcium and iron). This means when we eat this refined sugar our bodies must go in search of these minerals and vitamins in order to balance the body and digestion.

So what are some of the **natural sweeteners**, where do they come from and how can I use them in my baking? Here is a little summary to help guide you but I encourage you to play and experiment!

Granulated Maple Sugar: as the name suggests this is maple syrup turned into sugar. It’s fantastic to bake with and can be substituted evenly giving most recipes a more natural, wholesome sweetness. The only downside is that it’s quite expensive.

Date Sugar: this sugar made from dates (granulated dehydrated dates) keeps the vitamins and minerals intact. The flavour is a little stronger than refined sugar so for that reason you want to use less of it – if a recipe calls for 1 cup of sugar you should use 2/3 cup of date sugar. I think it’s nice in breads and spicy foods since it has that richer flavour.

Rapadura: This is an unrefined and unbleached whole sugar cane product – basically, as noted above, typically the sugar cane is split into the refined sugar (sans minerals) and molasses (avec minerals) whereas this contains both. The flavour is a little like caramel – essentially imagine mixing sugar with molasses! – and the texture is more like a grain than a sugar crystal (tiny little grains). You can substitute 1 cup of Rapadura for 1 cup of white sugar though. It works best in richer baked goods – like brownies or something with a deeper flavour.

Brown Rice Syrup: this is the syrup from brown rice (this is what is used in Cliff bars!). It’s fairly sticky – sort of a mix between barley malt and maple syrup I guess? It can be used in place of any of the syrups (maple, honey, molasses) or if you are substituting it for sugar you want to use a little more of the syrup (it is not as sweet so you need more) – use 1.25 cups of rice syrup for every 1 cup of sugar. However, because you are substituting a syrup (wet ingredient – with moisture) for a dry ingredient (sugar – no moisture) you will also need to decrease the liquids in the recipe by ¼ cup.

Maple Syrup: Lighter than brown rice syrup but with a very similar substitution – again, if the recipe calls for a syrup feel free to substitute. However if it calls for syrup use 1.25 cups of maple syrup for every cup of sugar and then decrease the liquids by ¼ to 1/3 cup.

Agave Nectar: One of my favourite sweeteners, agave nectar comes from the cactus-like agave plant. It’s sweeter than sugar (supposedly about 1/3 sweeter) and has a low glycemic index, hence you can use less of it. Replace 1 cup of sugar with ¾ cup of Agave plus, since it’s a liquid, you also need to reduce the liquids in your recipe by 1/3.