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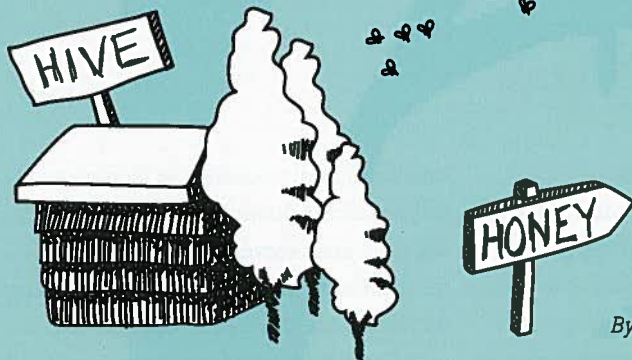


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# finding your **sweet** spot.



By Cherie Soria

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Life is full of sweet choices, and today we have more options than ever for sweeteners to use to create our healthy raw desserts!

Healthy desserts? Isn't that an oxymoron? Well, to some degree, it is. Refined, condensed sugars in any form, raw or not, should be limited, since they can raise blood sugar and cause a myriad of health problems. Most people know by now that white sugar is not a health-promoting food. In fact, it is a health destroyer, especially for people with compromised wellness. But even those of us without such challenges can experience the detrimental effects of sugar – and not just white sugar. All concentrated sugars should be consumed in moderate amounts. Depending upon the kinds of sugars present in the sweetener, and what else it is eaten with, sugar and concentrated sweet foods can cause spikes in blood sugar, poor digestion, and much more serious problems like

diabetes and heart problems.

Many raw fooders think that just because a food is raw, it must be good to eat. After all, it hasn't been heated, so what's the problem? The sweet truth is that people don't eat desserts and other sugary treats for their health – they eat them because they taste good and we are attracted to the taste. Fortunately for most of us, enjoying both good health and sweet treats does not have to be mutually exclusive! By choosing our sweeteners carefully, and by limiting our portions, we can enjoy treats without guilt and without doing our bodies harm.

There are many types of sugar, categorized by their source and sweetness. Sugar can be extracted from cane, roots, shoots, sap, nectars and flowers, seeds, fruits, leaves, bark and animals (honey). In their natural state, each has its own flavor, nutritional profile and type(s) of sugar. Each kind of sugar has a

different effect on the body, measured by the glycemic index. The most well-known sugar is sucrose. Sucrose comes from sugar beets or sugar cane. Fruit sugar is called fructose; milk sugar is called lactose; malt sugar is called maltose; and sugar from honey or sweet fruits is mostly glucose and fructose. Fructose is the sweetest sugar; sucrose is the next sweetest, followed by glucose, maltose, and lactose.

Many whole sweet foods are health-promoting – it is the process of concentrating the sugars into a crystalline form or syrup that causes health problems.

Fortunately, many sweeteners contain a high level of nutrients – in fact, many superfoods, containing health promoting antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and bioflavonoids, can be used as sweeteners.

## **The Glycemic Index**

The glycemic index (GI) is a way of



classifying foods according to how they affect your blood sugar: how much time it takes for the carbohydrate in a food to enter your bloodstream, how much it raises your blood glucose and how long your blood glucose remains elevated. Foods rated at 70 or above on the glycemic index are considered to be high glycemic; 56 to 69 is considered medium GI, and 55 and under signifies low GI. Foods with a high GI often trigger a dramatic upward spike in blood sugar, which tends to be followed by a drop in blood sugar. Foods with a low GI tend to gently and gradually supply the carbohydrate needed to fuel your

brain and body; these foods cause a small rise. (A little-known fact: Most commonly eaten whole fruits range from low to medium on the glycemic index; at 72, only watermelon reaches the low end of the high range.)

The GI of fructose and high-fructose foods, such as agave syrup, is considerably lower than that of other sugars. One would naturally assume that this makes fructose and high-fructose syrup the preferred sweeteners. However, recent research suggests that these sweeteners are harmful for our health and may work against our weight-loss goals. It's important to look beyond the glycemic index, especially when a food component has been refined (separated from a whole food) and concentrated.

Looking beyond fructose-based sweeteners, other simple sugars extracted from plant foods generally contain few nutrients and rank high on the glycemic index. They digest quickly and can cause blood sugar to rise and then fall dramatically. These types of sweeteners should be limited to celebration foods. Eat refined simple carbohydrates in moderation, or on occasion (ideally counted in times per month or times per year, not times per week), or in accordance with the advice of your health practitioner.

The bottom line? Unrefined, whole fruits are the hands-down healthiest choice for sweetening our foods. Think of them first, when possible, as you consider the options for adding sweetness to your favorite dishes.

For more information about the glycemic index please see *The Raw Food Revolution Diet* or visit [GlycemicIndex.com](http://GlycemicIndex.com).

### Sweeteners at a Glance

**Agave:** Agave is thick, natural syrup made from the juice of the agave plant. It has a delicate flavor that is easy to mask. Choose light agave nectar for a mild flavor and color, and dark agave syrup for a molasses-like taste, when color is not an issue or when dark color is desirable. Use when thickness is not an issue (frozen desserts, soft creams, blended beverages and the like), since it is only available in liquid form. Agave's low GI rating seems to vary from 27-47, which is lower than cane sugar, maple syrup, or honey. About ½ cup replaces 1 cup of sugar. Make sure you choose a brand that is processed without heat or chemicals and is pure agave syrup with no additives.

### Coconut Sugar (aka jaggery):

Coconut sugar is made from the sap of coconut flowers or tubers. It is collected and boiled down to create something resembling light brown sugar, with a milder flavor. It can be purchased in blocks, as soft paste or in granulated form. Can be used as a concentrated sweetener like brown sugar, or as a sprinkle on fruit or other desserts. Excellent in desserts requiring a granulated sugar. Coconut sugar averages 35 on the GI and is a great source of minerals.

**Dates:** There are dozens of varieties of dates. Some are soft, some semi-dry, and others very dry, but all contain relatively little water and do not become much more concentrated upon drying. They have a very sweet, bright taste, mild enough in flavor to be camouflaged by other ingredients. When soaked and blended, dates thicken puddings, pie fillings and sauces. When unsoaked and processed with nuts and/or dried

coconut, they act as binding agents for pie crusts, cakes and cookies. Date sugar can be used like maple sugar or evaporated cane juice, but dates do not completely dissolve unless blended with liquid. For date paste, soak to soften, remove the pits, then mash or blend. Date paste may be used in place of honey or maple syrup. Dates are high on the GI at 103.

**Dried fruits:** Blueberries, cherries, figs, goji berries, golden Himalayan raisins, golden Inca berries, huckleberries, mulberries – each have their own distinct flavor and appearance. Dry fruits at low temperatures outside in the sun or in a dehydrator to preserve enzymes and other nutrients, or purchase a sun-dried variety. Fruits can be used in powder form or made into a paste and added to savory and sweet foods of all kinds. Use to thicken and bind desserts. Most have a stronger, more distinct flavor than fresh fruits and should be selected according to the flavor desired in the dessert. Dried mission figs complement chocolate nicely. Raisins give depth to mock graham cracker crusts. Soaked dried fruit may also be blended with the fresh fruit to create a thick mousse (apricots, mangos and pineapples are delicious prepared this way). GI varies, depending on the fruit, and

dried fruit has a higher GI than fresh fruit. Like fresh fruit, dried fruits contain significant amounts of vitamins, dietary fiber, minerals and phytonutrients, as well as concentrated fructose. Most sweet fruits also contain pectin, making them especially useful in desserts, since pectin is a natural thickener. Conventional dried fruit may contain sulfur dioxide, so buy only organic, low-heat dehydrated fruits.

**Evaporated cane juice** (aka Rapadura whole cane sugar): This product consists of flash-dried, whole cane juice in granulated form. Rapadura brand is the highest-quality product on the market. The flavor is similar to dark brown sugar, due to its high molasses content. It can replace white or brown sugar in desserts and is delicious in mock graham cracker crusts and fruit crisp toppings or anytime a brown sugar flavor is desired. In things like chocolate, a small amount of evaporated cane sugar will add a wonderful depth of flavor, but use only a small amount or it will overpower other tastes. It is not as high on the GI as white sugar, but still relatively high. It is 96% sucrose and 4% minerals. Although not raw, it is a whole food. Rapadura is an organic fair-trade product.

**Lucuma powder:** Lucuma is a naturally sweet, golden-yellow or

orange fruit from Peru. It is about the size of a large softball and similar in appearance to sapote, with flesh a lot like mango in texture. Lucuma is usually purchased sun dried and powdered. Powdered lucuma is made from the ground, dried fruit and is used as a flavoring agent and mild sweetener. It is popular in ice creams for its vanilla custard-like flavor and can be added to custards, cream fillings and nut sauces. To sweeten, use about 1 teaspoon of lucuma powder to each ¼ cup of liquid requiring sweetener, or to suit your taste. It is a low GI whole-food sweetener, an excellent source of beta-carotene, niacin and iron.

**Maple syrup, maple butter, maple sugar:** Maple syrup is made from the boiled sap of the maple tree. It takes about five gallons of sap to make a pint of syrup. Maple butter and maple sugar are more highly concentrated than the syrup. Not raw, it has a unique and distinctive flavor and is used by many raw food chefs as an alternative to refined sugar. High on the GI, it's 65 percent sucrose, 35 percent water, and it contains a minute amount of minerals. Use only organic pure maple syrup, since anything less could be genetically modified corn syrup with as little as 3 percent maple syrup.

**Mesquite meal:** Mesquite meal is



evia

Dates

Maple syrup

Dried figs

Molasses

Coconut sugar

Raw honey

made from pods from the mesquite trees grown in the Southwestern region of the U.S. and Mexico. It has a mildly sweet, caramel-like flavor. Use to thicken shakes and smoothies and as a replacement for flour in breads, cakes, cookies and pie crusts. Lower on the GI than most other sweeteners, mesquite meal helps stabilize blood sugar levels and curb the appetite.

**Molasses and muscovado sugar:** These are slightly sweet, intensely flavored products that remain after processing of beet sugar. First-press molasses is light in color and flavor. Repeated boiling results in dark blackstrap molasses. Both products add a deep underlying flavor and are popular in cookies, especially oatmeal or ginger and spice cookies. Add just a few tablespoons to give depth to desserts like pumpkin pie. Blackstrap molasses and muscovado sugar are not raw. They are 65 percent sucrose, ranking them high on the GI. They do contain measurable amounts of iron, calcium, magnesium and potassium, making them more nutritious than most refined sweeteners.

**Raw honey:** Raw honey is an unprocessed, unfiltered syrup that contains pollen and enzymes. It is essentially stolen from bees, so it is not a vegan product, even though many raw fooders use it for its health

benefits. Strong flavor can overpower other flavors. Dark agave syrup can be substituted in most cases. Honey is high on the GI and not recommended for infants and small children, due to the enzymes present in the bees' saliva. It is sweeter, higher in calories and raises blood-sugar levels more quickly than white sugar.

**Stevia:** Derived from the leaf of the stevia plant, stevia has a naturally sweet taste and comes in dried, powdered (green) leaf, concentrated powder or liquid form. Two hundred times sweeter than sugar, with a strong licorice-like taste, stevia should be used in very small amounts. Use alone or combined with other sweeteners to decrease the total amount of sweetener. A few drops will make a huge difference. Stevia has a GI of 0, no calories, and does not elevate blood-sugar levels; however, it may cause side effects such as possible disruption of hormones and fertility, so it should be used sparingly.

**Yacon syrup:** Made from a delicious edible tuber grown in South America, yacon is sweet and low in calories. The root has a mild, sweet flavor with a moist, crunchy texture slightly reminiscent of fresh-picked apple, pineapple and watermelon. Low on the GI and low in calories, it is used as an alternative glucose-free sweetener.



### Carrot Pudding with Lucuma Caramel Sauce

Yields 3 cups (serves 6)

#### Carrot Pudding

- 1/2 c coconut water or pure water
- 2 carrots (6 oz) chopped
- 1 avocado (1/2 c), chopped
- 1/2 c coconut sugar
- 1/2 c yacon syrup
- 2 t pumpkin pie spice
- 1/4 t sea salt

#### Lucuma Caramel Sauce

- 1 c date paste
- 1/4 c lucuma powder
- 1/4 c coconut sugar
- 2 T agave (optional)
- 1/2 t vanilla powder or extract
- 1 pinch of sea salt

Blend all ingredients for Carrot Pudding in a high-speed blender and blend until smooth and creamy. Spoon 1/2-cup servings into small ramekin dishes and chill. If desired, serve each with 1-2 tablespoons of Lucuma Caramel Sauce. To make the Lucuma Caramel Sauce, blend ingredients until smooth.



Mesquite meal

Evaporated cane juice

Lucuma powder

Yacon syrup