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Contact: Susan Hershberg
617.232.1000 ext. 4911
susan.hershberg
@americastestkitchen.com

RETHINK BAKED GOODS WITH NATURAL SWEETENERS AND LESS SUGAR WITH A TIMELY NEW BOOK FROM AMERICA'S TEST KITCHEN

In the wake of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's crackdown on sugar as the new dietary villain, millions of Americans are looking at sugar from a whole new perspective. According to the USDA's new guidelines, released in January, we should be consuming half as much sugar in order to thwart the current obesity crisis and numerous other health issues. That means just 48 grams, or 12 teaspoons, per day, and given how much hidden sugar is found in packaged foods like yogurt, cereal, and fruit juice, most people probably surpass this limit by the time breakfast is over. And if you want to enjoy a few homemade cookies or brownies or a slice of cake, staying within the new guidelines is nearly impossible, given that a traditional chocolate chip cookie has about 25 grams of sugar and a slice of cake about 69 grams.

Enter America's Test Kitchen, who tackled this problem head-on with a new collection of low-sugar and naturally sweetened baked goods: *Naturally Sweet: Bake All Your Favorites with 30% to 50% Less Sugar*. Sure, you can often take a small amount of sugar out of a recipe without disastrous results, but go much further, and you risk cookies that don't spread properly, cakes with a heavy crumb, and dry, leaden muffins. Add to this the fact that the test kitchen wanted to develop these recipes with more-natural alternatives to highly processed white sugar, and the task just got more daunting.



NATURALLY SWEET: BAKE ALL YOUR FAVORITES WITH 30% TO 50% LESS SUGAR

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Through rigorous testing, the test kitchen learned just how far was too far when it came to removing sugar from favorite baked goods. Every recipe in the book has at least 30% less sugar than a traditional recipe, and many have 50% less (38% of the recipes reached or exceeded this high bar). Simple techniques like adding extra leaveners and alternative fats (extra yolks and softened, rather than melted, butter) solved the problem with many low-sugar cookies; when trying to make a low-sugar holiday cookie, we ran into unattractively domed instead of flat cookies, but we found that striking the sheet pan against the counter halfway through baking solved this problem. For a decadent-tasting chocolate cake with nearly half the usual amount of sugar, adding more baking powder and using oil instead of butter were key. The test kitchen also amped up flavorings like vanilla, citrus zest, and spices, so no one missed the extra sugar.

As for baking with alternative sweeteners, the test kitchen relied on a carefully chosen few that were easy to find and added complementary flavors to the recipes: Sucanat, coconut sugar, date sugar, honey, maple syrup, and molasses. And for those who prefer to use white sugar but simply want to use less of it, that option is spelled out, too, where it applies.

With this book in hand, there is no need to forgo dessert. In fact, in side-by-side tests, the lower-sugar versions often rated more highly, since traditional recipes often add so much sugar that the flavor nuances of fruit, chocolate, or other ingredients are masked. And by carefully matching natural sweeteners to specific recipes, the flavors are amplified, as with red velvet cupcakes where Sucanat adds deep caramel notes or lemon bars where the honey in the lemon curd adds silkiness and allows the tartness of the lemons to shine through. So don't give up on dessert altogether. Change the way you approach baking with the recipes in this book, and you'll easily make recipes that are healthier and rely on more-flavorful, less-processed sweeteners.

Some Recipe Highlights:

Blueberry Muffins (page 29)

Sugar content per serving: 20 g before, 11 g after

Everyone loves blueberry muffins, but our traditional recipe contained 20 grams of sugar per serving. We decreased the sugar to just 11 grams and used Sucanat in place of granulated sugar to give the muffins a rounded, molasses-y backbone. Since decreasing the sugar made the muffins dense and rubbery, we re-created the light, tender crumb of a traditional muffin by swapping the all-purpose flour for lower-protein cake flour. To boost flavor, we browned the butter and added some lemon zest and a small amount of cinnamon. Grinding the Sucanat helped prevent the muffins from coming out looking speckled.

Chocolate Chip Cookies (page 76)

Sugar content per serving: 25 g before, 15 g after

To make a lower-sugar version of our favorite chocolate chip cookies, we used Sucanat in place of regular sugar, since its molasses flavor fit the cookie's profile nicely. Swapping the typical semisweet chocolate chips for bittersweet chocolate helped reduce the sugar content even further. But the reduced sugar meant that the cookies didn't spread enough and were dry and crumbly. Softening, rather than melting, the butter helped the cookies spread more. For a dense and chewy texture, we increased the amount of leavener: While our traditional recipe called for $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of baking soda, we found that $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon of baking soda along with a teaspoon of baking powder caused the cookies to "overleaven," so they rose high in the oven and then fell, creating a denser, chewier center. Letting the cookie dough rest for 30 minutes allowed the Sucanat to fully hydrate and gave the cookies a fuller, rounder flavor.

Strawberry-Chamomile Streusel Bars (page 120)

Sugar content per serving: 14 g before, 7 g after

For a flavor-packed filling that didn't require sugar-filled store-bought jam, we made a Sucanat-sweetened quick jam using frozen strawberries (which are of reliable quality and sweetness year-round). But tasters wanted deeper flavor in the filling, and reducing the mixture further only resulted in a leathery,

gloppy texture. Instead, we looked to the pantry for inspiration and found an unconventional solution in chamomile tea bags. When steeped in the strawberry mixture, the tea underscored the berry flavor beautifully. To keep our recipe streamlined, we made a buttery shortbread dough that doubled as our crust and the base of the streusel topping.

Chocolate Layer Cake (page 124)

Sugar content per serving: 69 g before, 39 g after

We were shocked when we realized that our favorite chocolate cake recipe had a whopping 69 grams of sugar per serving. We increased the amount of leavener to make sure our low-sugar cake stayed light and fluffy (a bit of white vinegar helped maximize the leavener's power) and used oil rather than butter for the moistest crumb. Since sugar would usually enhance the chocolate flavor of the cake, we looked to another ingredient to boost the chocolaty taste: hot brewed coffee, whose bold flavor underscored the chocolate without being overpowering. For the frosting, we turned to a Swiss meringue buttercream, which calls for cooking egg whites with sugar.

Apple-Pear Pie (page 174)

Sugar content per serving: 50 g before, 34 g after

Apple pie is a classic dessert, but most recipes call for copious amounts of sugar along with the apples. We found that we could sweeten the apples with just $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of Sucanat and still achieve a filling that was plenty sweet, but tasters found this pie a bit one-dimensional and bland, even with the molasses flavor of Sucanat. Adding extra spices helped, but the amounts of spices necessary to give the pie enough flavor completely overpowered the apples. We solved this problem by using pears in addition to the apples, along with a small amount of cinnamon and the seeds from a whole vanilla bean. Although our traditional pie crust recipe calls for a tablespoon of sugar in the dough, we found it unnecessary when paired with our ultraflavorful filling.

Caramel Nut Tart (page 200)

Sugar content per serving: 52 g before, 26 g after

Caramel is usually made by cooking granulated sugar, but we were eager to see if we could re-create its hallmark texture and flavor using natural sweeteners. As it turned out, we could. For our Caramel Nut Tart (traditional versions of which are loaded with sugar and often drizzled with chocolate), we decided to make a caramel with Sucanat, since its rounded molasses notes would give the caramel enough flavor that we could achieve a big impact with a relatively small amount. We were surprised to find that the Sucanat thickened to just the right consistency at only 260 degrees—about 100 degrees less than caramel made with granulated sugar.

MEDIA REQUESTS

The editors of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* are available for interviews upon request. For more information or for television, radio, or print interview requests, contact:

Susan Hershberg
617.232.1000 ext. 4911
susan.hershberg@americastestkitchen.com

About America's Test Kitchen

America's Test Kitchen is a 2,500-square-foot kitchen located just outside Boston. It is the home of *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* magazines and is the workday destination of more than four dozen test cooks, editors, and cookware specialists. Our mission is to test recipes until we understand how and why they work and until we arrive at the best version. We also test kitchen equipment and supermarket ingredients in search of products that offer the best value and performance. You can watch us work by tuning in to our public television shows, *America's Test Kitchen* and *Cook's Country from America's Test Kitchen*.

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