

Sweet without sugar by Louise Racine

Who doesn't love the taste of something sweet? Most of us – not just our kids -- really find something comforting in a cookie or bowl of ice cream.

But the reality is that obesity and diabetes are on the rise, particularly among kids, and a high intake of sugar is one of the main reasons why. Sugar is high in calories and has no nutritional value. It can play havoc with blood sugar levels. And some studies link excessive amounts of sugar to behavioural problems in kids.

It's clear that we need to make wiser choices when it comes to the amount of sugar in our family's diet. But how do you restrict sugar without causing mayhem among the kids?

Artificial sugars, I would suggest, are not the answer. Because they are chemicals, they are not suitable for growing bodies. But I'm happy to report that there are healthier options – natural products like stevia and agave nectar – that are great sugar substitutes. And most kids can't tell the difference.

Stevia a sweet sensation

Stevia is an herb that is native to Paraguay. It's been used as a sweetener for centuries in South America and extensively in Japan since the 1970s. It has no calories and does not affect blood sugar levels.

Stevia is hundreds of times sweeter than sugar, so a little goes a long way. Just one teaspoon of liquid or a half-teaspoon of the powder can replace up to a cup of sugar! It even comes in little packets that make it easy to travel with.

The innovative use of stevia everyday can help wean kids from sugar. For instance, one friend will no longer allow pop in her house. Instead, her kids make their own using soda water and various flavours of stevia, like vanilla, chocolate-raspberry, and orange, etc. Another mom adds vanilla-flavoured stevia to plain yoghurt, for a kid-friendly but sugarless treat. Plus, her son routinely makes his own lemonade, using bottled lemon juice and stevia. With no complaints!

Baking with stevia is a little tricky because it does not have the same chemical reaction as sugar. So go with the tried and true – check out the recipes below or other stevia recipes – and there are plenty to be found – on the internet.

Note: When purchasing stevia at your local health store, ask for the best quality and brand. Generally, the higher percentage of glycosides, the better the quality of the product. Poor quality stevia can have a bitter aftertaste.

Nectar for the kids

A lesser-known product is agave nectar, which is a mild tasting liquid sweetener produced from a Mexican plant. It's similar to honey but with a less distinctive taste and thinner consistency. Like honey, it can also be used to sweeten beverages and most dishes. To substitute it in recipes calling for regular sugar, use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of agave nectar to replace one cup of sugar and reduce other liquids called for in the recipe by $\frac{1}{3}$.

Agave is safe for diabetics. The glycemic value (effect on blood sugar) of agave nectar is low compared to other sugars - three times lower than honey and high fructose corn syrup.

As with all products, quality varies so do your research before you buy. You can purchase stevia and agave nectar at health food stores and at some bulk stores.

The recipes I chose to share in this issue are ideal for school lunches or after school snacks.

Granola Bars

This recipe comes from www.blueagavenectar.com

I used homemade granola, which contains coconut, pumpkin and sunflower seeds, and almonds.

2 tbsp. agave nectar

2/3 cup sliced almonds or dried fruit

2 eggs, beaten

2 cups granola

1/3 cup hemp hearts

1 tsp. vanilla

½ tsp salt

1/4 cup unsalted butter or sunflower oil

Place all ingredients in a mixing bowl. Blend well. Pat into a greased 8-inch square baking dish. Bake at 350 degrees for 18-20 minutes or until lightly brown. Cool and cut into 16 bars.

Cornapple Muffins

I adapted this vegan recipe from one found on www.steviainfo.com.

Dry Ingredients:

2 cups spelt flour

1 cup cornmeal

1 tbsp non-aluminum baking powder

1 tsp cinnamon

1/8 tsp sea salt

1/2 cup roasted sunflower seeds, divided

Liquid Ingredients:

2 cups grated apples

10 to 15 drops stevia

1/2 cup sesame tahini

3/4 to 1 cup milk beverage of your choice

1 tsp vanilla

4 oz soft tofu

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine dry ingredients in a bowl, reserving two tablespoons of sunflower seeds for topping. Mix together well. Combine tofu with some of the milk beverage in a blender or blend with a whisk. Blend with the rest of the liquid ingredients in a mixing bowl. Combine wet and dry ingredients together, mixing gently -- don't over mix. Divide batter into lightly oiled muffin tins and sprinkle sunflower seeds on top. Bake for 25 minutes or until tops are golden. Makes 12 muffins.

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To get more free recipes, subscribe to her free monthly e-newsletter at lunarnotes@thirteenmoons.ca