



# The Healthiest Natural Sweeteners, Ranked, and How Best to Use Them

By Mary Margaret Chappell  
2024-12-09 13:54:46

When it comes to natural sweeteners, there are a lot of tasty options to choose from. There is also a lot of confusion around them. Which ones are best nutritionally? Which ones work best as a sugar substitute? And what are some of the advantages and pitfalls of cooking with each? As a former pastry chef whose primary sweetener had always been white sugar, I've been asking myself these questions and experimenting with the options ever since I started working on whole-food, plant-based recipes for Forks Over Knives.

To clear things up once and for all, I spoke with registered dietitian Sharon Palmer about the range of natural sweeteners available to health-minded cooks, and together we've ranked and rated them according to their nutritional bona fides and culinary versatility. The result is the following comprehensive guide that's a must-read for all cooks and food lovers.

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## 1. Date Paste



[Date paste](#) is made by soaking or simmering whole, pitted dates in liquid then blending them into a thick, sweet puree. It's easy to make at home and will keep in the fridge for up to a month and the freezer for six months.

### Nutrition Score: A

"Because date paste is made from whole dates, you get all of the fiber and many of the nutrients in the original fruit, including potassium, copper, and vitamin B6," Palmer explains. "It is concentrated in natural sugars, so a little goes a long way."

### Cooking/Baking Score: A

[Date paste](#) tops our list of natural sweeteners for its availability, versatility, and concentrated sugar content. Date paste's thick, smooth texture makes it a go-to sweetener for everything from baked goods to salad dressings. It can even be used as a 1:1 substitute for cane sugar in many conventional recipes. The only downside to date paste is its dark color, which affects the look, but not the taste, of light-hued sauces and desserts.

### Our Favorite Ways to Use Date Paste

- Decadent desserts like [Chocolate Mousse Pie](#)

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- Quick breads like [Cranberry Orange Pumpkin Muffins](#)
- [Pancakes](#)
- Piquant sauces like [Date-Sweetened Mustard Dressing](#) and [Easy Date Barbecue Sauce](#)

## 2. Applesauce

Coming in at a very close second is unsweetened applesauce. Made by cooking apples until they break down into a soft, glistening puree, it's a vegan baking staple that's used to replace both eggs and fat called for in conventional recipes.

### Nutrition Score: A

Like apples, applesauce is high in fiber, vitamins, and antioxidant compounds that help boost the nutritional profile of recipes.

### Cooking/Baking Score: A

Applesauce comes in second behind date paste because it lacks the same sweetening power and 1:1 substitution capacity for sugar. What applesauce does have, however, is thickening, binding, and emulsifying properties that add body and structure to vegan recipes. Applesauce's light color also makes it a good choice for delicate cakes and quick breads where other elements need to shine.

### Our Favorite Ways to Use Applesauce

- Pale cakes like [Triple Apple Cake](#)
- Baked fruit desserts with biscuit- or dumpling-style toppings like [Vegan Blueberry Cobbler](#)
- [Chocolate chip cookies!](#)

## 3. Bananas



The sweet, fiber-rich tropical fruits can be easily mashed into a sweetening puree.

### Nutrition Score: A

"When you sweeten recipes with bananas, you get the benefits of the whole fruit, including fiber, potassium, and vitamins B6 and C," says Palmer.

### Cooking/Baking Score: A

Two words for why bananas are in a natural sweetener category all their own: [nice cream](#). Without bananas' soluble fiber (pectin), nice cream wouldn't have its luscious texture or all-natural sweetness. The same goes for smoothies, smoothie bowls, quick breads, and desserts. When swapping bananas for sugar in a recipe, count 2 tablespoons of mashed bananas for every 1 tablespoon of sugar. This substitution will work for up to half of the sugar called for in a recipe. Beyond that, the extra moisture and fiber in bananas (compared to sugar) may alter the taste and texture.

For extra sweetness and flavor, opt for very [ripe and over-ripe bananas](#), which are sweeter, softer, and more flavorful, making them the best options for baked goods and desserts. Tip: As soon as bananas in your fruit bowl start going brown, peel and move them to an airtight container in the freezer so you'll always have them at the ready.

### Our Favorite Ways to Use Bananas

- [Banana Bread](#)
- [Vegan Banana Pancakes](#)
- [Just Bananas Muffins](#)

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- On the savory side, try adding 1 to 2 teaspoons banana puree to tomato sauces and tomato-based soups the same way Italian cooks add a pinch of sugar to enhance flavor.

## 4. Date Sugar



Date sugar is made by grinding dehydrated dates into a fine powder that mimics the consistency of granulated sugar. It is similar to brown sugar and it can be used 1:1 for any type of sugar in a recipe except confectioners' sugar.

### Nutrition Score: A

Date sugar is a whole food that retains many of the nutrients in the original fruit, including fiber. (Two teaspoons of date sugar contain 1 gram of fiber.) Even though it is concentrated in natural sugars, date sugar has a lower glycemic index than granulated sugar, Palmer explains.

### Cooking/Baking Score: A-

Why the minus? One reason is the fiber in date sugar, which can alter the texture of baked goods by absorbing more liquid. The tiny date bits don't dissolve as well into batters or doughs as other natural sweeteners, either. The other reason for the A-minus grade is date sugar's price. At 75 cents or more per ounce (1 oz. = 2 tablespoons), it's one of the most expensive natural sugars on the market.

### Our Favorite Ways to Use Date Sugar

- In cakes and quick breads like [Zecret Vegan](#)

[Zucchini Bread](#) where its toffee-like flavor can really shine.

- Date sugar is also luscious as an oatmeal topping and a garnishing sugar for baked goods because it won't dissolve when exposed to heat or moisture.

## 5. Pureed Prunes (Dried Plums)

[Prunes](#), like dates, are intensely sweet dried plums that can be blended into a thick paste or puree for a sweetener.

### Nutrition Score: A

Palmer gives prunes a high rating as a whole-food sweetener. "When you sweeten with prunes, you retain many of their key nutrients such as fiber (3 grams per 1.5-ounce serving!), plus good amounts of vitamins A, C, K, iron, potassium, manganese, copper, and vitamin B6," she says.

### Nutrition Cooking/Baking Score B+

Prune puree is a little less versatile than date paste because of its deep brown color and tangy, fruit-forward flavor notes. It's also less sweet. [The California Prune Board](#) recommends substituting prune purée for up to one-half of the sugar in a recipe, and it also functions as an egg and fat replacer.

### Our Favorite Ways to Use Prune Puree

With anything and everything chocolate! Prune puree deepens the flavors of chocolate desserts like our [Vegan Chocolate Mousse](#). Plus, the chocolate masks prunes' dark color. Try prune puree in place of date paste in [Peanut Butter Chocolate Marble Pudding](#) or [Easy Date Barbecue Sauce](#) as well.

## 6. Pure Maple Syrup

Maple syrup is a ready-to-use sweetener made by boiling down sap from sugar maple trees until it becomes thick and sweet. It is graded by color from "Amber" (light and delicate) to "Very Dark" (almost opaque, with a strong maple flavor).

### Nutrition score: C

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Palmer explains her just-passing grade this way: “While maple syrup comes from plants and has a lower glycemic index than table sugar, it is a concentrated sweetener and impacts blood glucose levels.”

## Baking/Cooking Score: A-

Maple syrup is both a sweetener and a flavoring agent that can play either a starring or supporting role in recipes. Its liquid form makes it easy to incorporate into all kinds of recipes, even frozen desserts. King Arthur Flour recommends substituting equal amounts of maple syrup for sugar, even though maple syrup is one-third less sweet, which is an easy way to reduce the total sugar of a conventional recipe.

## Our Favorite Ways to Use Maple Syrup

- Sauces, dressings, and marinades
- Maple-flavored pancakes, waffles, and quick breads

## 7. 100% Fruit Juice

Fruit juice varies in sweetness depending on the fruit—grape juice is among the highest in sugar. It can be used as is or simmered into a concentrated syrup for added sweetness in recipes. Be sure to look for 100% fruit juice, with no added sugar.

## Nutrition Score: B

“Although fruit juices contain many of the fruit’s original nutrients, their sugars are quickly absorbed into the bloodstream due to the absence of fiber and their sugar concentration,” cautions Palmer.

## Cooking/Baking Score: B

Fruit juice offers an easy way to add sweet, colorful zing to sweet and savory recipes. It’s a major asset to all types of whole-food, plant-based salad dressings, since it can act as a replacement for oil, as well. Concentrated fruit syrups, made by simmering fruit juice until it sweetens and thickens, make great drizzles for sweet and savory dishes.

## Our Favorite Ways to Use 100% Fruit Juice

- Tangy slaws

- Leafy green and grain salads
- Caramelized [Red Onion Confit](#), which gets its gorgeous color from pomegranate juice

## 8. Coconut Sugar/Palm Sugar



Coconut sugar and palm sugar are two types of sugar made by reducing the sap from certain types of palm trees until the natural sugars crystalize.

## Nutrition Score: C-

“These natural sweeteners are refined sugars, even though they are less processed than cane sugar,” notes Palmer. “They do have a lower glycemic index than cane sugar, however.”

## Baking/Cooking Score: B

Coconut and palm have a rich, toffee-like flavor similar to brown sugar. Because they are refined sugars, they should be used in moderation and paired with healthier natural sweeteners.

## Our Favorite Ways to Use Coconut and Palm Sugars

Think of these tasty sweeteners as recipe boosters to be added when a cake needs a fine crumb and a little extra sweetness, such as our [Incredible Chocolate Sweet Potato Cake](#).

## 9. Maple Sugar

When maple syrup is cooked until its sugars crystallize,



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you get maple sugar. It's a favorite among bakers and maple lovers because of its concentrated sweetness and distinctive flavor.

## Nutrition Score: C-

Palmer gives maple sugar a lower score than maple syrup on a nutrition scale because of how its concentrated sugars impact blood glucose levels.

## Baking/Cooking Score B-

While very tasty, maple sugar just isn't as all-purpose as the other semi-refined sugars because of its robust maple taste. It's also pricey, if delicious.

## Our Favorite Ways to Use Maple Sugar

- Special occasion cakes and cupcakes like our [Double Chocolate Cupcakes](#)
- Maple sugar is also a wonderful finishing sugar for sprinkling over desserts and hot cereals as a garnish.

## 10. Pure/Raw/Unrefined Cane Sugar



Pure cane sugar is made from cooked sugarcane juice that has been clarified and crystallized. It is coarser and less processed than white or table sugar. "Unrefined" sugar, like sucanat, retains the cane's molasses but is still technically refined. The same goes for raw sugar, like demerara, turbinado, and evaporated cane juice, which are made from cooked sugarcane juice and then crystallized just once. Pro tip: To ensure that your sugar is 100% vegan, you can choose certified-organic, raw, or "unrefined" varieties. That's because other varieties may

be filtered through bone char (aka natural carbon) to make it white.

## Nutrition Rating: D

Palmer gives all these versions of cane sugar the lowest nutritional rating. Pure or unrefined cane sugars are still highly processed. "There are essentially no remaining nutrients left other than sugars," she says.

## Baking/Cooking Score B

Is cane sugar allowed on a whole-food, plant-based diet? That's a question we get asked a lot at Forks Over Knives. The answer is yes, it is allowed conservatively, and you'll find recipes here on the website that call for it. "Sometimes it's worth the 'spoonful of sugar' to get the right recipe texture or results," explains Forks Over Knives Editor-in-Chief Elizabeth Turner. Those times include getting yeast to rise for a [Vegan Challah Bread](#), keeping [Vegan Strawberry Blondies](#) blond and deliciously tender, and pickling of [pickled green beans](#) in a brine that's tangy and bright.

## Our Favorite Ways to Use Pure Cane Sugar

Very conservatively as needed to achieve special textures, ideally in tandem with natural, whole-food sweeteners.

*To learn healthy, delicious vegan recipes and master whole-food, plant-based culinary techniques at home, check out [Forks Over Knives Cooking Courses](#)!*