

SUGAR, HONEY AND OTHER SWEETENERS

There are a wide number of sugars to be found for purposes of sweetening foods. Fructose is the primary sugar in fruit and honey; maltose is one of the sugars in malted grains; pimentose is found in olives, and sucrose is what we know as granulated or table sugar. Sucrose is a highly refined product made primarily from sugar cane though sugar beets still contribute a fair amount of the world supply. Modern table sugar is now so highly refined as to be virtually 100% pure and nearly indestructible if protected from moisture. Powdered sugar and brown sugar are simple variations on granulated sugar and share its long life.

Liquid sweeteners do not have quite the longevity of dry sugars. Honey, cane syrup, molasses, corn syrup and maple syrup may crystallize or mold during long storage. These syrups are chemically not as simple as table sugar and therefore lose flavor and otherwise break down over time.

GRANULATED SUGARS:

Buying refined sugar is a simple matter. Select a brand you know you can trust, be certain the package is clean, dry and has no insect infestation. There's little that can go wrong with it.

GRANULATED: Granulated sugar does not spoil, but if it gets damp it will grow lumpy or turn into a sugar rock. If it does, it can be pulverized into smaller pieces and used. Granulated sugar can be found in varying textures, coarser or finer. "Castor/ caster sugar" is a finer granulation than what is commonly sold as table sugar in the U.S. and is more closely equivalent to our super fine or berry sugar.

POWDERED, CONFECTIONERS, ICING: All names refer to the same kind of sugar, that is white granulated sugar very finely ground. For commercial use there is a range of textures from coarse to ultra-fine. For home consumption, what is generally found is either Very Fine (6X) or Ultra-Fine (10X), but this can vary from nation to nation. Not all manufacturers will indicate the grind on the package. Sugar refiners usually add a small amount of cornstarch to prevent caking which will make it undesirable for use in sugar syrups or solutions where clarity is needed.

Powdered sugar is as inert as granulated sugar, but it is even more hygroscopic and will adsorb any moisture present. If it soaks up more than a little it will cake and become hard. It's difficult to reclaim hardened powdered sugar, but it can still be used like granulated sugar where clarity in solution (syrups) is not important.

BROWN, LIGHT & DARK: In the United States brown sugar is generally refined white sugar that has had a bit of molasses or sugar syrup and caramel coloring added to it. Dark brown sugar has more molasses which gives it a stronger flavor, a darker color and makes it damp. Light brown sugar has less molasses which gives it a milder flavor, a blonder color and is slightly dryer than the dark variety. Light brown sugar can be made by combining one fourth to one third white sugar to the remainder dark brown sugar and blend thoroughly.

Both varieties need to be protected from drying out, or they will become hard and difficult to deal with. Nor do you want to allow them to become damper than what they already are.

There are dry granulated and liquid brown sugars available, but they don't have the same cooking qualities as ordinary brown sugars. They also don't dry out and harden quite so readily either.

RAW, NATURAL, TURBINADO & OTHERS: In recent years, refiners have realized there is a market for less processed forms of cane sugar in the U.S. so have begun to sell these under various names and packaging. None of them are actually raw sugar as it is illegal to sell in the States due to the high impurities level in the truly raw product. All will have been processed to some degree, perhaps to remove the sticky surface molasses or to lighten the color, but will not have been subjected to the full refining and whitening processes of ordinary white table sugar. This leaves some of the natural hue and a strength of flavor that deepens with the color. All of these less refined sugars may be stored and handled like brown sugar.

Outside of the United States it is possible to buy cane sugars from the truly raw product with all of the detritus remaining from the cane juice extraction process up through various stages of refinement much like we have here in the United States. Many can be found with names such as "muscadado", "jaggery" (usually a raw palm or date sugar), "demerara", "succanat," and others. Colors will range from quite dark to blonde and may or may not be sticky with molasses. Generally, the darker the color the stronger the flavor will be. In spite of any impurities, they can be stored like brown sugar since their sugar content is high enough to inhibit most microbial growth. Recently I have found demerara sugar for sale here in the U.S.

STORING GRANULATED SUGARS. All granulated sugars have basically the same storage requirements. They need to be kept in air tight, insect and moisture proof containers. For powdered, and granulated sugar you might want to consider using some desiccant in the storage container if your local climate is damp. Since brown sugars and raw sugars are supposed to be moist, they do not need desiccants. Shelf life is indefinite if kept dry, but anything you intend to eat really should be rotated occasionally. Time has a way of affecting even the most durable of foods.

I've used brown sugar that was six years old at the time it was removed from storage and, other than the molasses settling somewhat toward the bottom, it was fine. A friend to whom I gave a bucket of the brown sugar finished it off three years later which was nine years after it was packaged and it, too, was fine.

HONEY

Honey may be the oldest sweetener known to man - its use predates recorded history. Remains of honey have been found in the Egyptian pyramids. This product of honeybees is typically sweeter than granulated sugar by a factor of 25%- 40% depending upon the specific flowers from which the bees gathered their nectar. This means a smaller amount of honey can give the same amount of sweetening as sugar. The source flowers also dictate the flavor and the color as well. Honey color can range from very dark (nearly black) to almost colorless. As a general rule, the lighter the color and the more delicate the flavor, the greater the price the honey will bring. As you might expect, since honey is sweeter than table sugar, it also has more calories as well — an average of twenty-two per teaspoon compared to granulated sugar's sixteen. There are also trivial amounts of minerals and vitamins in the bee product while white sugar has none. Honey is not a direct substitute for table sugar however, its use in recipes may call for a bit of alteration to make them to turn out right.

Although the chance is remote, raw honey may also contain minute quantities of Clostridium botulinum spores so should not be fed to children under one year of age. PLEASE READ THE POST FROM GERI GUIDETTI CONCERNING THIS BELOW. Raw honey is OK for older children and adults.

Honey comes in a number of forms in the retail market and all with somewhat different storage characteristics:

WHOLE-COMB: This is the bee product straight from the hive. It is the most unprocessed form of honey, being large pieces of waxy comb floating in raw honey. The comb itself will contain many unopened honey cells.

RAW: This is unheated honey that has been removed from the comb. It may contain bits of wax and other small particles.

FILTERED: This is raw honey that has been warmed slightly to make it easier to filter out small particles and impurities. Other than being somewhat cleaner than raw honey it is essentially the same. Most of the trace amounts of nutrients remain intact.

LIQUID/PURE: This is honey that has been heated to higher temperatures to allow for easier filtering and to kill any microorganisms. Usually lighter in color, this form is milder in flavor, resists crystallization and generally clearer. It stores the best of the various forms of honey. Much of the trace amounts of vitamins, however, are lost.

SPUN, CRYSTALLIZED or CREAMED: This honey has had some of its moisture content removed to make a creamy spread. It is the most processed form of honey. It keeps quite well. Also available in various flavors.

BUYING HONEY: Much of the honey sold in supermarkets has been blended from a variety of different honeys and some may have even had other sweeteners added as well. Like anything involving humans, buying honey can be a tricky business. It pays to deal with individuals and brands you know you can trust. In the United States you should buy product labeled U.S. GRADE A or U.S. FANCY if buying in retail outlets. However, be aware there are no federal labeling laws governing the sale of honey, so only honey labeled pure is entirely honey and not blended with other sweeteners. Honey grading is a matter of voluntary compliance which means some producers may be lax in their practices. Some may also use words like "organic", "raw", "uncooked" and "unfiltered" on their labels, possibly to mislead. Fortunately, most honey producers are quite honest in their product labeling so if you're not certain of who to deal with, it is worthwhile to ask around to find out who produces a good product.

Honey may also contain trace amounts of drugs used in treating various bee ailments, including antibiotics. If this is a concern to you, then it would be wise to investigate with your local honey producer what they may have used.

STORING HONEY: Honey is much easier to store than to select and buy. Pure honey won't mold, but may crystallize over time. Exposure to air and moisture may cause color to darken, flavor to intensify and may speed crystallization as well. Comb honey doesn't store as well liquid honey so you should not expect it to last as long.

Storage temperature is not as important for honey, but it should not be allowed to freeze or exposed to high temperatures if possible. Either can cause crystallization and heat may cause flavor to strengthen undesirably.

Filtered liquid honey will last the longest in storage. Storage containers should be opaque, airtight, moisture and odorproof. Like any other stored food, honey should be rotated through the storage cycle and replaced with fresh product.

If crystallization does occur, honey can be reliquified by placing the container in a larger container of hot water until it has melted. Avoid adding water to honey you intend to keep in storage or it may ferment.

Avoid storing honey near heat sources or petroleum products (including gasoline/diesel engines), chemicals or any other odor-producing products which may infuse through plastic packaging.

Yes, raw honey can contain the temperature resistant spores of *Clostridium botulinum*, the bacterium that causes botulism. The organism is a strict anaerobe, meaning that it only grows in the absence of molecular oxygen. The problem with infants and honey is that the small, intestinal tract of an infant apparently is sufficiently anaerobic to allow the spores to germinate into actively growing *C. botulinum* organisms. Essentially, the infant serves the same role as a sealed, airtight, contaminated can of beans as far as the organisms are concerned. There in the infant's body the bacteria secrete the dangerous toxin that causes the symptoms of botulism. There have been quite a few documented infant deaths due to honey. As I recall, the studies identifying honey as the source were done in the '80s. Most pediatricians recommend no honey for the first year. It is probably best to check with your own for even later updates...Geri Guidetti, The Ark Institute

EDITOR'S NOTE: The advice not to give raw honey or foods containing raw honey to infants under one year of age still stands. Do please understand, though, that honey is not the only means by which infants can suffer from botulism, in many of which cases no certain source of contagion could ever be determined. The actual chances of any infant being stricken is very, very small and keeping the child's colon open, active and healthy can reduce it still more. Breast-fed children seem to be more resistant as well.

HONEY OUTGASSING

Q: My can of honey is bulging. Is it safe to use?

A: Honey can react with the can lining to release a gas especially when stored over a long period of time. Honey's high sugar content prevents bacteria growth. If there is no sign of mold growth, it is safe to eat.

CANE SYRUPS

CANE SYRUP: Seldom found in supermarkets pure cane syrup is a sweet symbol of the U.S. Deep South. Produced by boiling down the extracted juice of the sugarcane in much the same fashion as sorghum and maple syrups are produced. The best syrup is clear with a dark amber color and a smooth intense flavor. Cane syrup usually has to be purchased from roadside stands, living history recreations, farm festivals, or state and county fairs. Some syrup makers will add small quantities of lemon juice or corn syrup to deter crystallization. Flavored cane syrups can sometimes be found, but are usually a sign of inferior syrup.

MOLASSES: A by-product of sugar refining, molasses is generally composed of sugars such as glucose that are resistant to crystallization, browning reaction products resulting from the syrup reduction process, and small amounts of minerals. Flavor can vary between brands, but is usually strong and the color dark and opaque. Sulfured molasses can sometimes be found but its intense flavor is unappealing to most. Brands labeled as 'blackstrap molasses' are intensely flavored.

SORGHUM SYRUP: This is produced in the same manner as cane syrup, but sweet sorghum cane, rather than sugar cane, is used. Sorghum tends to have a thinner, slightly sourer taste than cane syrup. Good syrup should be a clear dark amber with a smooth flavor. It can sometimes be found in the supermarket, but more often is found in the same types of places as genuine sugar cane syrup.

TREACLE: This sweetener comes in varying colors from a rather dark version, similar to, but not quite the same as blackstrap molasses, to paler versions more similar to golden syrup. If you cannot find it in your store's syrup area check in their imported foods section.

All of the above syrups are generally dark with a rich, heavy flavor.

GOLDEN SYRUP:

This syrup is both lighter and paler in color than any of the above four, more similar to what we would call a table syrup here in the U.S. Can usually be found in the same areas as treacle above.

TABLE SYRUP: There are many table syrups sold in supermarkets, some with flavorings of one sort or another such as maple, various fruits, butter, etc. A close examination of the ingredients list will reveal mixtures usually of cane syrup, cane sugar syrup or corn syrup along with preservatives, colorings and other additives. Table syrup usually has a much less pronounced flavor than molasses, cane or sorghum syrup or the darker treacles. Any syrup containing corn syrup should be stored as corn syrup.

STORING CANE SYRUPS:

All of the above syrups, except for those having corn syrup in their makeup, have the same storage characteristics. They can be stored on the shelf for about two years and up to a year after opening. Once they are opened, they are best kept in the refrigerator to retard mold growth. If mold growth does occur, the syrup should be discarded. The outside of the bottle should be cleaned of drips after each use. Some pure cane and sorghum syrups may crystallize in storage, but this causes no harm and they can be reliquified using the same method as for honey. Molasses or other sugar refining by-products won't usually crystallize, but will dry into an unmanageable tar unless kept sealed.

CORN SYRUP: Corn syrup is a liquid sweetener made by breaking down cornstarch into its constituent sugars through an enzyme reaction. Available in both a light and a dark form, the darker variety has a flavor similar to molasses and contains refiners syrup (a by-product of sugar refining). Both types often contain flavorings and preservatives. It is commonly used in baking and candy making because it does not crystallize when heated. Corn syrup is common in the U.S., but less so elsewhere.

Corn syrup stores poorly compared to other sweeteners and because of this it often has a best if used by date on the bottle. It should be stored in its original bottle, tightly capped, in a cool, dry place. New unopened bottles can be expected to keep about six months past the date on the label and sometimes longer.

After opening, keep the corn syrup four to six months. These syrups are prone to mold and to fermentation so be on the lookout for bubbling or a mold haze. If these present themselves, throw the syrup out. You should wipe off any drips from the bottle after every use.

MAPLE SYRUP: Maple syrup is produced by boiling down the sap of the maple tree (and a lot of it too) collected at certain times in the early Spring until it reaches a syrup consistency. This native American sweetener is slightly sweeter than table sugar and is judged by much the same criteria as honey: Lightness of color, clarity and taste. Making the syrup is energy and labor intensive so pure maple is generally expensive. Maple flavored pancake syrups are usually mixtures of corn and cane sugar syrups with either natural or artificial flavorings and should be kept and stored as corn syrups. New unopened bottles of maple syrup may be kept on a cool, dark, shelf for up to two years. The sweetener may darken and the flavor get stronger, but it is still usable. After the bottle has been opened, it should be refrigerated. It will last about a year. Be careful to look out for mold growth. If mold occurs, discard the syrup.