



Homemade Method™

Week 16: Boost your Desserts the Homemade Way

Overview

Most candies and desserts sold commercially include refined sugars & flours, artificial colors, flavorings, preservatives and trans fats, which are all known to contribute to obesity and chronic diseases.

So why not give your desserts a boost by whipping up your own healthier version of your favorites? Renowned New York Times Journalist & Author, Michael Pollan, once famously said: *"You can eat anything you want, just cook it yourself"*. When you cook something from scratch at home with real, fresh ingredients, you are miles ahead of any store-bought version. This is because your Homemade dessert will be free from chemicals and include loads of nutritious, health promoting ingredients. And do you know what? The real deal, made at home with love always tastes better anyway!

This week you are going to learn our top cooking tips and hacks for delicious, healthier Homemade desserts. You are also going to learn how to use fruits, dried fruits and alternative nutritious sweeteners (such as honey, maple syrup, coconut sugar or stevia) to replace refined white sugars in your cooking & baking (note: there is a science to it!). By the end of this week, you will have learnt all of the tricks of the trade for cooking healthy desserts that taste so good you would never guess they were good for you!

Baking Tips for Homemade Desserts

Here's our list of the top 10 cooking tips to make sure your Homemade desserts turn out looking and tasting delicious:

1. **Buy quality & fresh ingredients** - always, for all cooking - this is probably the most important advice of all! This especially applies to ingredients like baking soda, which are essential for the chemical reaction that allows your baked items to rise.
2. **Use ingredients that are at room temperature** (ie. eggs, milk, butter).
3. **Using measuring cups:** Use measuring cups for dry ingredients and gently scrape off the top with a butter knife to get an accurate dry ingredient measurement. Spray glass measure cups with cooking spray to prevent items from sticking. Eg. honey.
4. **Sprinkle not stir:** Where possible, try to sprinkle a small amount of sugar on top of your foods, instead of stirring it through. Because the crystals make contact with the sensors on your tongue, you taste the sweet with much less sugar added.
5. **Getting your baked goods in and out:** Line loaf pans/brownie pans with parchment paper so they slide on & out. Use an ice cream scoop to scoop out muffin batter or fill freezer bags and cut the bottom corner and then squeeze out.
6. **Always preheat your oven** to the correct temp. If using a glass pan lower temperature by 25 degrees to prevent over baking.
7. **Get to know your oven:** Is your oven slow or fast? That is, if a recipe says the dish will cook in 30 minutes, does yours normally cook slower (known as a slow oven) or quicker (known as a fast oven). Turn your item in the oven halfway through the cooking time. All ovens have hot and cold spots, so rotate your item during the cooking process so it cooks evenly.
8. **Don't try to 'cheat' on baking times:** ie. If it says 350 degrees for 30 mins and you are in a hurry, don't think you can do 450 degrees for 20 minutes (yes, we've all been there..).

9. **FOLLOW THE RECIPE:** We LOVE improvising when cooking. But there is one exception: When it comes to baking, you need to follow the recipe EXACTLY to get the correct result, especially if you are a beginner cook. Similarly, weigh your ingredients - we recommend a cheap digital scale. And make sure you fully complete each step - if it says to beat your egg whites until peaks form - then don't try to stop until you see the peaks. As you get more advanced, go to the next step:
10. **ALTERNATIVELY, Don't follow the recipe:** Don't feel pressured to follow a recipe exactly but be sure to know essential ratios. I.e. If you substitute sugar for honey, then how much honey should you use, and how does this change the amount of wet ingredients needed in the recipe? (See below, Healthy Sweeteners for the answers). You will develop a sixth sense for this over time: Be patient and enjoy the fun of seeing how your 'experiments' turn out in the meantime!

Healthy Hacks for Homemade Desserts

Now, here's our top health hacks for boosting your desserts - Homemade style!

1. **Reduce sugar:** For most recipes, you can reduce the amount of sugar added by $\frac{1}{4}$ or up to $\frac{1}{2}$ and still have a delicious result. You most probably won't even notice the difference. One of the big benefits of doing this regularly, is you start to adjust your palate so you will get the same enjoyment from less sweet items, and also crave less sweet things.
2. **Switch it out:** Another great tip is to switch out some of the added sugar for fruit or dried fruit (see below for ideas on how to do this). Or to substitute some of the sugar for healthy sweeteners (see 'Healthy Sweeteners' below for more info).
3. **Use salt:** Salt brings out the flavor of sweetness (so you can add less sugar to get the same pleasure. Just add a pinch of salt to your desserts and baking. If you are watching your sodium intake, focus on reducing salt in any processed & convenience foods you eat (which contain many, many fold more) - the pinch used in your desserts has a negligible effect and is not the place to eliminate it.

Fruit Fixes

How to use fruit to make desserts that taste good & are good for you:

1. **Fruit:** Use fruit wherever possible in Homemade desserts - or just enjoy fruit as a dessert itself. Fruits contain natural sugars that make them taste sweet, while the fibre content means they won't raise your blood sugars and provide health benefits such as reducing risk factors for many chronic diseases. Fruits are also very high in antioxidants & many vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients

How to use it:

- a. **Raw:** Use ripe fruits when eating them raw - slice thinly, arrange on a plate, add toasted nuts or greek vanilla yogurt and drizzle with honey. Best choices are strawberries and stone fruits (peaches, nectarines & apricots).
 - b. **Frozen:** Alternatively, most frozen fruits take on an incredible creamy, sweet consistency. Just make sure you peel them before freezing, and enjoy as is, or blend. Best choices are grapes, mangoes, berries, watermelon & bananas.
 - c. **Roasted:** Baked and roasted fruits are amazing because the heat caramelizes the sugars, bringing out the natural sweetness. Just drizzle with olive oil and place in the oven on a baking tray for about 15-20 mins. Best choices are stone fruits, apples & pears.
 - d. **Stewed:** You can cook any chopped fruit with a splash of water and a squeeze of lemon juice on the stove for about 10-15 mins, to make a delicious, sweet, all natural sauce or jam. Best choices are stone fruits, apples & pears. Use to stir through yoghurt or on bread as a jam substitute.
 - e. **In Baking:** You can add ripe bananas, apples, applesauce, stone fruits, berries & almost any other fruit to add healthy sweetness. When used in baking note that fruits create a wet batter, so remember to take out approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of wet ingredients for every 1 cup of fruit you use.
2. **Dried Fruits:** Next best on the list is dried fruits. They contain most of the benefits of fruits, and a delicious chewy, sweetness. They are a bit more concentrated in sugar so should be eaten mindfully, if enjoyed on their own. Best choices are dates, raisins, coconut, cranberries & dried apricots.

How to use it: You can use dried fruits in the same ways as raw fruits. If you are enjoying them raw, eat them as is or soak them in water first to create a plump juicy consistency. Use about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the amount of fresh fruit you would use.

How to use Healthy Sweeteners

When you are baking, cooking or seasoning your food, try switching out white, refined sugar with one of these healthier alternatives:

- **Honey** is 25 to 50% sweeter than sugar, and has a distinctive flavor. The flavors and colors of honey can vary depending upon the bees' diet—buckwheat honey, for example, is darker and stronger than clover honey. Baked goods made with honey are moist and dense, and tend to brown faster than those made with granulated sugar. **Even though honey contains sugar, it's exact combination of fructose & glucose actually helps the body regulate blood sugars!** It is also anti-viral, anti-fungal, probiotic and has an antioxidant called flavonoids which fight cancer and heart disease.

How to use it: If a recipe calls for 1 cup of sugar, use $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of honey, and reduce the amount of liquid in the recipe by 5 tbs. You can use honey in soft moist cakes & ice creams - but not for anything that requires creaming.

- **Maple syrup** is made from the sap of sugar maple trees, the sap is boiled into a syrup. Grade A maple syrup is golden brown and has a delicate flavor. Grade B is thicker, darker, and is better for baking because it has a stronger flavor. Maple Syrup is also full of beneficial nutrients (Grade B is best), including zinc, thiamine, and calcium. It also contains antioxidants that have anti-cancer, anti-bacterial, and anti-diabetic properties.

How to use it: If a recipe calls for 1 cup of sugar, use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of maple syrup and reduce the amount of liquid in the recipe by 5 tbs. Best for puddings, ice cream, sauces. Not for recipes that require 'creaming'.

- **Molasses** is a byproduct of refined sugar production. It contains small amounts of B vitamins, calcium, and iron. Molasses has adds strong flavor to baked foods, but is not as sweet as sugar. It has the lowest sugar content of any ingredient made from sugar cane. Blackstrap molasses contains important vitamins and minerals, such as iron, calcium, magnesium, vitamin B6, and selenium

How to use it: If a recipe calls for 1 cup of sugar, use $1\frac{1}{3}$ cups of molasses and and reduce the amount of liquid in the recipe by 5 tbs. Great for gingerbreads &

cookies, although the flavor can be too intense for some people.

- **Stevia** is a naturally sweet herb that has been used for hundreds of years in South America. Studies have shown that stevia can lower blood sugar and insulin levels after a meal, compared with traditional sugar. It has also been shown to lower blood pressure.
How to use it: Stevia is much sweeter than sugar - 300 times according to the manufacturer! So if a recipe calls for 1 cup of sugar, you only need to use 1 Tbs of stevia. Stevia can be used in baking & other desserts in the same way as regular sugar.
- **Agave** is derivative of the same plant as tequila, this golden sweetener tastes similar to honey. Agave syrup is a low glycemic sweetener. Use about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of Agave for every cup of sugar called for in recipes. Studies have shown that agave may have weight loss benefits by reducing appetite (due to the presence of fructans).
How to use it: For each cup of white sugar, replace with $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of agave, and reduce liquids in the recipe by about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup. Best for cakes, cookies & brownies. As well as used in any way you might use honey (ie. drizzled over oatmeal or yoghurt or in your tea!)
- **Coconut Sugar** is made from the sap of coconut flowers, this natural sugar comes in block, paste, or granulated form substituted in equal amounts. Coconut sugar has a caramel like flavor. Coconut sugar has high levels of zinc, iron & antioxidants. It also supports gut health due to the presence of inulin, a prebiotic which feeds the good bacteria in the gut.
How to use it: Use about 1 cup of coconut sugar to replace 1 cup of white sugar in recipes. Best for cookies, shortbreads, frosting.

Remember: All of these sweeteners still contain sugars in some form, so enjoy them mindfully as a special occasion and with other Nourishing foods!