

DR. CHRISTOPHER'S
Herbal Legacy Newsletter

What's the Deal with Agave?

by Traci Sellers

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As we look at the agave plant, some interesting things emerge that would make it fun to live near one of the more sugar-rich species (there are many species of agave).

Agave nectar is gathered by cutting the stalk right before flowering. Right as the plant readies its blossoms there is a rush of sap (analogous to the flow of sap in the sugar maple trees in the early spring when they are tapped for maple syrup). This rush of sap is capitalized upon by the harvester, who cuts a hole in the flower shoot (stopping the blossoming process) and is then able to gather the sap freely as it pumps right out of the plant for the next 8 months (up to 16 quarts a day!)

Next, a plant enzyme is introduced into the sap to convert the complex sugars into simpler ones similar to those found in honey. The mixture is then dehydrated to reduce the water content so the liquid is thick and syrupy. Most agave is dehydrated at temperatures that exceed 140 degrees, but agave labeled 'Raw' is kept below 113 degrees, preserving enzyme content.

This sap or "nectar" is wonderfully sweet and mild flavored, and although it has been harvested in South America since Aztec times, it has been recently gaining popularity in the natural foods industry as a wholesome sweetener for many good reasons.

Agave is most recognized for its low-glycemic index properties. This is largely because, while very sweet, the carbohydrates in agave break down very slowly into the kind of sugars that raise "blood sugar." The advantage here is that your body will extract sugar from agave like a time-release capsule--slowly and only about as fast as the body can handle it, making it an exciting new sweetening option for diabetics.

This break-down can be assisted by choosing 'Raw' agave nectar, which will have a higher enzyme content than heated varieties. The enzymes in raw foods act as 'keys' to unlock the nutrients they contain. Any food devoid of its own enzymes will require our pancreas or liver, etc, to produce them. Thus 'Raw' agave seems to be the ideal for diabetics and those who wish to avoid added digestive strain.

Some other interesting facts about the agave plant:

The flowers are sweet and edible.

The leaf juice will lather in water like soap with natural saponins.

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The plant contains Diosgenin, a chemical also found in wild yam and fenugreek which is a hormonal regulator. Diosgenin is also an anti-inflammatory, a liver protectant, an anti-stress and an anti-fatigue chemical.

Another prominent chemical is Sarsapogenin, which is useful for psoriasis and bleeding gums.

Mezcal is made from the untreated sap of the agave plant. The most well known variety of mezcal is called Tequila! (Don't worry; the enzyme-converted and dehydrated sweetener you purchase will not turn to alcohol, although if left at room temperature for more than a year, it will begin to ferment.)

We keep both honey and agave nectar on hand for various uses, but one advantage that is unique to agave is its ability to dissolve easily in cold liquids, making it more convenient for sweetening teas that have cooled, smoothies or other cold beverages. My favorite brand is Madhava, and I purchase the raw variety in gallon jugs to save a considerable amount of money.

To substitute agave for sugar in recipes follow these 3 rules:

1. 2/3 cup agave replaces 1 c. sugar
2. In baking, to compensate for the extra moisture in the agave, reduce other liquids by 1 fl. Oz. per 2/3 c. agave used.
3. If baking with it, to avoid over-browning, reduce oven temp by 25 degrees and increase time by 6%.

Agave is a marvelous addition to your natural kitchen, take advantage of some today!

Traci Sellers

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