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## Sugar is sweet, but so are healthier alternatives

By **Courtney H. Diener-Stokes**

Reading Eagle correspondent

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Cookies and candy and cake, oh my. Still coming down from that holiday sugar high?

What better time to delve into the open-ended sea of alternative sweeteners.

A local organic bakery owner and a nutritionist talked about their favorite alternatives. These tips aren't simply directed to those who are trying to lose weight, but also to those who want to eat more healthfully, including more health-conscious sweets.

Tracy Benson, 61, owner of Lighten Up Nutrition Counseling Services in Spring Township, said she has developed a strong opinion about sugar consumption over her 30-year career.

According to Benson, artificial sweeteners aren't the answer to refined sugar replacements.

"Clients are trying to bake and are trying to just consume a healthier cookie," she said. "There are a lot of wonderful alternatives to the refined sugars."

Benson said that the word "alternative" is more appropriate to use than the word "substitute," most commonly associated with artificial sweeteners.

She is a big fan of date sugar.

"(It) is a really great alternative," she said. "An unrefined, natural, raw sugar in its natural form, such as dates, is clearly better than something that has all of the nutrients removed from it.

"One reason date sugar is better is that blood sugar will not react as readily to a food that hasn't lost all of its nutrients. The more refined the sugar, the more quickly the blood sugar will go up, and consequently, the more dramatically it will drop."

She mentioned another one of her favorite alternatives.

"I love Stevia," she said of the zero-calorie natural sweetener made from a stevia plant. "I have a rockin' muffin recipe (made with Stevia)."

If you want to stick with something as close as possible to a traditional white sugar when baking cookies, pies and cakes, according to Benson, turbinado sugar is the best way to go.

While some alternatives are definitely healthier, Benson cautioned not being overly zealous.

"You want to reduce the amount of any kind of sugar," she said.

Melanie Bare's business, Melanie's Organic Farm Bakery in the Fairgrounds Farmers Market, Muhlenberg Township, features breads, pies and cookies.

"I'm doing more and more experiments with healthier recipes," she said. "I'm using zero flour and sugar."

Since she started her business two years ago, Bare, 40, Exeter Township, who has a background in health and nutrition, has gravitated toward using local, organic ingredients.

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She has preferences when cooking based on the hits and misses of her experiments.

"I always liked agave and still use agave," she said, specifying it is best to buy raw agave nectar to get the most nutritional benefits.

"If you do use agave, just like any sugar, you have to use it in moderation," she said. "I don't use a lot and when I use it, I get something like Madhava (brand). It is organic, raw and certified and minimally processed; it is derived from the agave plant."

Her experiments eventually led her to coconut sugar and date sugar, which she said she just started using and has been pleased with the results. She said date sugar works well in a pecan chocolate pie she makes.

Bare also tries to use completely natural sugar alternatives, such as dates and bananas, in their natural state in recipes.

She has always liked using honey in recipes.

"The more I've read, I'm using more and more honey," she said. "It is a good, natural sugar; it is lower on the glycemic index."

Bare has a favorite recipe using honey.

"I make a lavender honey cake that is vegan, raw, no dairy," she said, adding she also makes a customer favorite, granola-based cookie using honey.

Bare exclusively uses pure honey made by Two Gander Farm, Oley Township.

She said it is important to be sure you are purchasing pure honey.

"There is a lot of honey in the grocery stores that is processed more, and they are cut with other things, such as corn syrup," she said. "I would recommend to people if they get honey to get it from a good, local source like Two Gander or other local honey resources."

If you want to avoid going through lots of experimentation, Bare suggested it is best to look for recipes on the Internet, in cookbooks or cooking magazines that call for alternatives to sugar in the recipe.

Her health-conscious customers are always checking in with her to catch up on the latest in the world of nutrition and healthy eating.

"More and more are looking for things without sugar," Bare said.

Leigh Breimhurst, manager of Kimberton Whole Foods, Douglassville, which carries many sugar alternatives, said customers have been making requests about how already prepared boxed and packaged foods are made.

"They want more products to have more of the alternatives in it already," Breimhurst said.

Contact Courtney H. Diener-Stokes: [life@readingeagle.com](mailto:life@readingeagle.com).

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345 Penn Street . Reading . PA . 19603 . 610.371.5000

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