



Photos by Ellen M. Blalock / The Post-Standard

Sweet things

Looking for alternatives to sugar?

Consider maple syrup, honey or even rice syrup



AMONG THE FOODS that can be made with sweeteners other than sugar are Spicy, Sweet, Salty and Savory Mixed Nuts (top), which food columnist Rochelle Bilow (above) is eating. That recipe, on Page C-3, uses maple syrup to sweeten nuts and seeds and also adds butter, salt, dried chillies and rosemary.

ROCHELLE BILOW
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



These days, it's easy to spot sugar as an ingredient in just about everything. From chewing gum to jarred spaghetti sauce,

the sweetener isn't hard to find.

So forgive me if I sound a little urgent about it all, but as I learn more about eating wholly and eating well, I've become a little sugar-averse. I dislike the way a shot of sugar spikes my energy, then leaves me feeling not just tired a couple of hours later, but cranky, aggressive and out of sorts.

For a brief few months, I

avoided sweeteners at all costs — along with most dairy and animal protein. You can imagine that did little to facilitate a cheery disposition, so as I transitioned into a more sustainable and realistic diet, I began to explore some alternatives to sugar.

My search for a desirable sweetener was headed by a few main criteria: It had to be easy for my body to recognize and digest, it had to be easily attainable — no traveling to the ends of the earth for a dessert fix — and it had to taste delicious.

I turned first to maple syrup, guided by my friends who work as structural therapists and let conscious, responsible and joyful eating guide both their practice and their lifestyle.

"Eliminate as much sugar as

possible," they said when cooking one day this summer. "You'll find you won't miss it much, but if you do, try maple."

I had access to a few quarts of maple syrup, boiled down from sap tapped from trees on the property where I live, so I baked

Watch Rochelle Bilow talk about sugar substitutes at syracuse.com/food.
Recipes: Page C-3

a pie crust made with local butter and the syrup. The result was elegant and subtle: a real stunner of a dessert that coyly hinted at sweet rather than bludgeoning me over the head with it. Plus, it had the added benefit of being

hyperlocal — a real bonus in my book.

I loved the romanticism associated with tapping trees in the winter, and I began to crave the smoke and caramel notes that came through before the syrup even touched my lips.

But if variety is the spice of life, it's also what makes it sweet. I wanted to acquaint myself with other sugar substitutes, so I focused my attention next on honey.

One of the things I've always liked about honey is its almost infinite varieties. It's made from nectar collected by bees, and since bees are pretty seasoned travelers, they can collect the stuff from as many different types of flowers as they can reach.

SWEETNESS, PAGE

QUICK BITES

North Syracuse eatery starts serving Sunday brunch

DON CAZENTRE

favorites and breakfast classics, with milk biscuits topped with sausage

That twist is food.

Leave it to my sweet tooth, which never met a chocolate chip cookie that it didn't totally crush on, to stop dead in its tracks on Page 76. Richard Avedon himself couldn't have shot a more compelling photograph, and the more I read, the more I liked.

An inspired idea sets this cookie apart. Rather than utilizing the scoop-and-drop method that makes the Toll House cookie such a beloved paragon of simplicity, this recipe, borrowing puff pastry principles, rolls out the dough and layers it, alternating with

looked nothing like the magazine's version. A second round was a slight improvement, but still several leagues below the beauties that emerged from Saveur's mighty midtown Manhattan test kitchen (which, by the way, is the real-life rendition of the handsome, lavishly equipped facility that exists in the fantasies of most home cooks).

My own baking cluelessness aside, a possible explanation for the disparity is a finishing step that author Sarah Copeland included in a previously published blog post. It doesn't appear in the magazine, but it's simple: Just before baking,

with a few grains of fleur de sel (high-grade sea salt).

That discovery sent me back to the kitchen. Unfortunately, my eureka moment never arrived. While the egg wash gave the cookies a pleasant sheen, the final results still didn't add up to Saveur's rendition. No wonder the magazine left that particular finishing touch out of its version.

Not that it matters, because while my attempts weren't exactly magazine-worthy, in the end, who cares what they look like? These things are amazing. The crackled tops — a golden, chocolate-pocked si-

— create a thin and enticing crisp outer shell that gives way to a thick-ish, chewy and exceedingly rich center. A teasingly salty kick plays nicely against all that bittersweet chocolate.

By the way, for those with rolling-pin anxiety, fear not; the preparation is easy. No exacting technical prowess is required, and a 2-inch biscuit cutter does the rest of the work. It's a soft dough, so it's best to work quickly — with a well-floured rolling pin — while the dough remains chilled and relatively firm. I can't imagine why I'd ever go back to the old scoop-and-drop method.

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Sweetness need not be from sugar; honey, maple syrup also available

SWEETNESS, FROM PAGE C-1

Clover honey has a simple, clean, sweet taste, while honey made from orange blossoms is intensely floral and herbaceous. Buckwheat honey is different as can be, with mouth-coating, molasseslike qualities. It's great in tea, as per traditional wisdom, but is also stellar drizzled on roasted carrots, baked into a simple cake made with local flour or spread on apple slices topped with aged cheese.

My search also led me to brown rice syrup, a sticky concoction made from culturing cooked brown rice, then straining and reducing the resulting liquid. It packs a real wallop of sweetness, one that I don't love, so I use it sparingly, and typically in tandem with more mellow ingredients: Stirring it into whole milk or cream, then pouring it over warmed leftover rice is one of my favorite get-it-and-go weekday breakfasts.

Barley malt syrup is another one of my favorites. It's made by soaking and sprouting barley, then cooking it until the starches break down. The barley is then strained and, as in the case of brown rice syrup, reduced to a thick consistency. It has an intensely funky taste, one that I think shines when used to complement savory flavors, like braised meat and hearty brown bread.

There are many other sweeteners available for exploration. Agave syrup, made from the agave plant; thick and creamy amasake, made also from brown rice; blackstrap molasses and even good old apple juice are all options on my



Stephen D. Cannerelli / The Post-Standard
MAPLE SYRUP can lend its delicate sweet flavor to a variety of foods. Above is syrup from the Cedarvale Maple Syrup Co. in the town of Onondaga.

radar.

With so much to try, I may even have to advocate the occasional exception to my "no dessert before dinner" rule.

Party at Aurora Inn features Prohibition-style ambience

PARTY, FROM PAGE C-1

"There's a market that seems to be untapped here," he said.

Twist opened in 2011 and works an eclectic mix of club events, such as salsa night, classic karaoke and a piano bar.

Jones said the place will have seating for about 50, including the bar stools.

Serving food to the late-night crowd could be part of Twist's future, Jones said.

Speakeasy fling

Put on your black tie (or

The Prohibition Era Cocktail Party, part of the inn's Epicurean Series, will feature "heavy" hors d'oeuvres and cocktails featuring the products of Finger Lakes Distilling, near Watkins Glen. The inn will be creating house-made elderflower liqueur, lavender simple syrup and bourbon cherries.

Cost per person is \$50, plus tax and gratuity.

The party starts at 7 p.m., and a live jazz band kicks into action at 7:30 p.m. Guests are encouraged to come dressed in "their bootleg and flapper best."

Sour traces

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Maple-Mustard Vinaigrette

From Rochelle Bilow

1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
½ teaspoon stone-ground or Dijon mustard

1 teaspoon sage leaves, chopped finely
½ teaspoon maple syrup
3 tablespoons sesame oil
Salt, pepper

Combine all ingredients in a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Close the lid and shake vigorously to combine completely. Unscrew and pour over salad greens. Serve immediately.

Spicy, Sweet, Salty and Savory Mixed Nuts

From Rochelle Bilow

4 cups combined raw nuts or seeds, in any combination you like, such as almonds, walnuts, pumpkin seeds or pecans
2 tablespoons maple syrup

¼ cup butter
1 teaspoon coarse salt
2 dried chillies, crumbled, or
½ teaspoon red chili flakes
1 teaspoon rosemary, chopped finely

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Spread the nuts on a baking sheet in a single layer and roast until slightly darker and very fragrant, about 10 to 12 minutes. Remove from the oven and pour into a mixing bowl.

Meanwhile, combine all remaining ingredients in a sauce pot. Cook over medium heat until the butter is completely melted. Stir to combine, then remove from the heat. Pour over the nuts and use a spatula to coat. Serve warm.