



## Agave Syrup in Natural Foods

Matt Trickey



Agave syrup is a sweetener that is rapidly gaining popularity among natural food enthusiasts. Native to the state of Jalisco in Mexico, the agave plant grows slowly but abundantly with no need for pest control or artificial fertilizer. It is a naturally organic crop from which a useful sweetener is derived.

Agave syrup, also known as agave nectar, is the concentrated sap of the agave plant. Agave has been grown and used historically both as a fiber and a medicine. Agave is also fermented into a traditional Mesoamerican beverage Pulque, and distilled into mezcal. Tequila, a popular form of mescal, is produced from the blue agave plant, *Agave tequiliana*. Several species including *Agave americana*, *Agave salmiana*, and *Agave tequiliana* are used in

agave syrup production.

Agave plants store their energy in the form of inulin, a dietary fiber consisting of long chains of fructose molecules bound together. Humans lack enzymes to break these bonds and digest inulin, but with minimal heating, inulin breaks into fructose molecules, which are sweeter than table sugar.

There has been some concern among health professionals about the use of agave syrup in a healthy natural diet. It is a simple sugar and should be consumed in moderation, but most of the concerns relate to cheaply produced, non-organic mixes of agave and other sweeteners like high fructose corn syrup. In this article I will explore some of the facts and concerns about pure agave syrup, and suggest common sense guidelines for its use.

Production of agave syrup begins with collection of the raw sap. An agave plant greatly increases

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## Edible Beauty in Your Flower Garden

Roxanne Magnuson



Here in the Northwest we are remarkably fortunate to have such an abundance of edible flowers in our yards

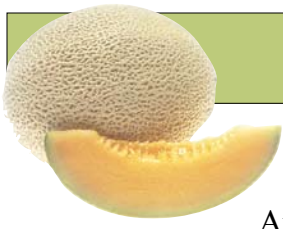
and gardens. It always surprises me how few people actually eat their flowers, believing them to be for vases or garnishes only. It's one of my joys to munch flowers in my garden. On my dinner plate I'll often eat a flower at the beginning and at the end of my meal.

My favorite is probably one of the most common – nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*), and I like both the flowers and the leaves. They have a mildly pepper-like taste. I tear the leaves and add them to salad. I've read that they've been used to treat scurvy because of their high vitamin

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# Summer Melons

Steve Michaud



Summer in Oregon provides us with some of the best produce. Among my personal favorites are melons. There are many different varieties of melons with many different flavors. Watermelons, honeydews, and cantaloupes are among the most commonly cultivated varieties, with many unique variations of each.

Melons originated in Africa, but quickly migrated in all directions to be cultivated for consumption. The popularity of muskmelons dates back to ancient Rome and Greece. It is thought that watermelons were first cultivated by the Egyptians, later spreading to Asia. Watermelons were held in such high regard in Egypt that they were placed in the tombs of the Pharaohs.

A commonly asked question about melons is whether or not seedless watermelons are genetically modified. They are not. Seedless watermelons are a simple hybrid of two different varieties of watermelons, brought about by cross-pollination by bees. If it were not for this natural process seedless watermelons would not be possible because without seeds they are sterile.

Melons are probably the best fruit to eat on a hot day. They are not only flavorful and nutritious, but they are thirst quenching as well. Melons are an excellent source of potassium as well as water, making them a great way to maintain a proper electrolyte balance in your body. While all melons contain a good amount of water, watermelons are appropriately named due to the fact that they are roughly 96% water.

Not only are melons tasty, but they are very nutritious as well. Melons are a good source of vitamins C, A, B6, and B3, folate, and potassium. The nutrient that cantaloupes are best known for is the one that gives them their orange appearance, beta-carotene. Watermelons are a good source of beta-carotene as well, but they prevail in the lycopene department. A high level of lycopene is what gives them their color.

There are three things that should be looked at when selecting a melon. First you should determine whether the melon was picked too early. A sure sign of a melon that is not mature is the stem still attached or tears in the rind at the stem end. When a melon is mature, it should just fall off of the stem easily, leaving a small clean

depression.

Second, check to make sure that the melon has not been damaged. A lot of melons, like watermelons, have some abrasions on their rinds, and these are all right. You will also want to look for soft spots which are a sign of over ripeness. Soft spots can also mean they have been stored under too much weight or they have been dropped. Cracks in the rind of the melon are also a deal breaker, avoid this.

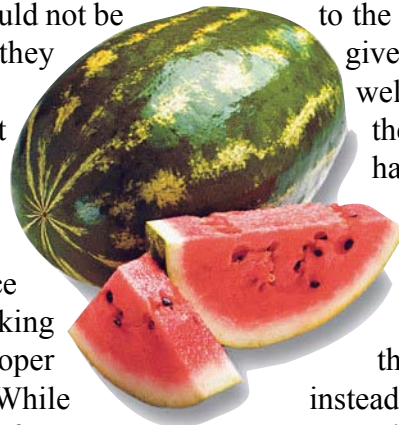
The third thing to consider is whether it is ripe enough. If the melon is both mature and undamaged, then it is OK if the melon is not ripe when you buy it. To ripen up melons leave them out at room temperature, and check them regularly.

To select a ripe honeydew melon, select one that has a totally creamy white appearance to the rind and has a little bit of give when a small bit of pressure is applied to the blossom end. Cantaloupes need to have a bit of give when pressure is applied to the blossom end as well. You should be able to smell the melon through the rind when it is ripe. Finally, cantaloupes should have a dull yellow background within the raised netting on the outside of the rind. Watermelons are a little bit harder than other melons. You want to select a watermelon that feels a bit heavy for it's size. Next, look at the bottom of the watermelon, the resting spot should be yellow instead of white.

When you are preparing a melon, make sure that you wash the rind thoroughly. The rind of a melon, especially a melon that is netted like a cantaloupe, is a prime place for bacteria to grow. If you are not using the entire melon, either tightly wrap the exposed interior of the melon with plastic or cut it up for storage in a container.

Honeydews and cantaloupes tend to quickly go from ripe to overripe. If they are ripe, it is best to keep them chilled until you are ready to eat them. Watermelons can sit out at room temperature for a longer period of time. Once you cut into any of these melons, you need to keep them refrigerated to keep them from spoiling.

It takes a bit of practice to figure out how to select the perfect melon. There is no time like the present to start practicing your skills at selecting ripe melons. Take advantage of the bounty of summer, and cut into a melon today.



production of its inulin-rich sap right before it flowers at the end of its life. Historically, the sap is collected from a hole in the thick stem of the plant or by chopping off the top and ladling sap from the interior. Up to eight quarts of sap can be harvested per plant each day. The plant continues to make a large amount of sap but eventually dies after flowering. On farms, agave plants are harvested just prior to flowering and the sap-rich central portion (pina) of the mature plant is pulverized and the remaining sugars are collected.

As soon as the sap is collected, it is slowly heated while the inulin fibers break into sugars. The water in the sap evaporates until a dark, viscous syrup remains. The syrup becomes shelf-stable because the concentration of sugars prevents fermentation. After minimal filtering, this mineral-rich concentrate is sold as the dark grade of agave syrup. The darker syrup contains the most flavor, minerals and nutritional fibers. Lighter grades can also be produced through more filtration.

Raw agave syrup can be produced by carrying out these processes in a vacuum so the water evaporates at lower temperatures (under 118 degrees Fahrenheit). It takes longer to make raw agave syrup so the raw syrup usually costs more. Raw syrup also contains more active enzymes so it must be carefully pH controlled so it is shelf stable.

It is in this processing where the differences between quality organic agave syrup and lesser quality agave products occur. Some manufacturers use a quick and cheap method that

results in poor-quality syrup—which is then mixed with corn sweetener (high-fructose corn syrup) and sold as “agave-sweetener.” A wise consumer should avoid using anything but certified organic pure agave syrup.

Recently, an article strongly suggested agave syrup is the same as high-fructose corn syrup. Fortunately, the comparison is false: the two sweeteners are similar only in fructose content.

Agave syrup is sweet because



it contains about 50% fructose, a natural sugar found in most plants. Fructose is metabolized slowly and does not raise blood sugar levels rapidly. In the human diet, fructose is usually accompanied by fiber, which slows its release and metabolism. It is important to note that agave syrup contains little fiber so the fructose within is released more quickly into the body.

Too much fructose in the diet can lead to obesity and insulin resistance, among other health concerns, so be sure to use only moderate amounts of agave syrup by itself. Ideally, agave syrup should be used to sweeten other foods that contain fats and fiber. Used this way, the fructose in agave presents less of a metabolic challenge to the body. A good example of this

is the use of agave syrup to sweeten energy bars or cereals, and in frozen confectionary like Coconut Bliss. In these examples, the fats and fibers slow the metabolism of fructose and signal the brain that the body is satisfied long before excess fructose is consumed.

Agave syrup is about 1.4 times sweeter than sugar so much less quantity can be used for the same sweetness. This is a great advantage of agave syrup: it doesn't take much syrup for a lot of sweetness. As with any sugar, moderate use is best for a healthy diet. Luckily the extra sweetness of agave syrup means it's easier to use moderately.

Agave syrup contains some inulin fiber along with other polysaccharides (long chain sugars). Inulin is a soluble fiber that passes undigested into the intestines where it feeds beneficial intestinal bacteria. These “good” bacteria thrive and can out-compete unwanted bacteria in the intestine. Inulin has been shown to help humans digest food and absorb minerals like calcium and magnesium.

Another thing to note when comparing agave syrup to high fructose corn syrup is that there is a significant difference in sustainability and the resources required to produce each one. Corn sweeteners are produced from genetically-modified monocrop corn fields which require huge investment of petroleum-based fertilizers, pesticides and fuel. Corn starch is produced, which is then subjected to bioengineered enzymatic hydrolysis to create high-fructose corn syrup. Without huge

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# Cheeses with Funny Names

Michelle Achee

It's time to venture off the beaten path a bit and spotlight three terrific French cheeses that are very popular at fancy cheese shops, but might seem a little intimidating when sitting in the same cooler as the prepackaged, easily pronounceable goodies. I receive a lot of requests from customers for new cheeses. These three are the most popular, so I've brought them back to the cheese case to liven things up a bit and challenge both taste buds and pronunciation skills.

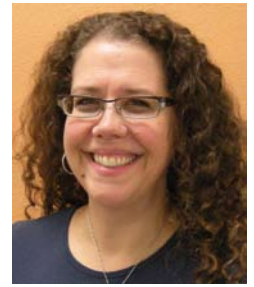


Ossau-Iraty (OH-so ear-ah-TEE) is a traditional, unpasteurized, semi-soft cheese made from sheep's milk. Produced in the Northern Basque Country in the French Pyrénées, it has very complex yet delicately smooth flavors, creamy, not bitter or overly sweet. It's slightly nutty and finishes rich and smooth. It is among the world's oldest cheeses, having been produced by Basque shepherds for more than 4,000 years. Pair it with fresh apples and pears, a nice Bordeaux or Rhone wine and some prosciutto and you have a picnic made in heaven!

Morbier (MORE-bee-yay) is a semi-soft, unpasteurized cow's milk cheese of France named after the small village of Morbier in Franche-Comté. Contrary to its smell, Morbier has a mild taste and leaves a wonderful, nutty aftertaste. It has a complex flavor full of nuts and



fruit, hay, grass, eggs and butter, and is immediately recognizable by the black layer of tasteless ash separating it horizontally in the middle. Traditionally, cheesemakers would end their day with leftover curd that was not enough to make an entire cheese. So, they would press the remaining evening curd into a mold, and spread ash over it to protect it overnight. The following morning, the cheese would be topped up with morning milk. Nowadays, the cheese is usually made from a single milking with the ash added for tradition. It melts beautifully and pairs very well with ham, walnuts, and fruity red wines or Gewürztraminer.



Mimolette (MEE-moh-LETT) is a creamy, hard, pasteurized cow's milk cheese traditionally produced around the city of Lille, France. It was originally made by the request of Louis XIV, who wanted a French cheese to resemble Dutch Edam.



In order to differentiate it from Edam, however, he had it colored orange, using annatto. Finding it in the cheese case is easy. Just look for something that resembles a cantaloupe from the moon. Mild and fruity, it is popular as a cooking cheese and as a snack to eat with crackers and a glass of beer. Happy snacking! 🍌

## Agave

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agricultural subsidies, this high fructose corn syrup would not even be profitable to make. The prevalence of this sweetener is due to your tax dollars.

Agave clearly has the advantage since it is native to the environment it is grown in, requires no pesticide or chemical applications, is fertilized naturally by the leaves that are chopped off during harvest, grows naturally in abundance and brings a good income to the native people who collect the sap. Since agave plants are created by nature and there are no artificial changes to their genetics, they can be certified as an organic crop. The same cannot be said of Monsanto corporation's GMO corn, which is not allowed under USDA rules for organic certification.

There is such an abundance of agave plants that new products are being developed to use this resource.

Collecting agave sap, or farming agave is economically beneficial to the indigenous people of Mexico. The agave industry provides a steady income to the local economy, which allows investment in education, health and sustains local communities. Organic production also means no exposure from pesticides or toxins to farm workers. The level of skill required for agave harvest leaves little room for exploitation of child labor. Skilled labor also means a living wage for the workers. Some agave companies have even started working toward fair-trade certification programs within the communities they buy from.

Because agave syrup is considered to have a low glycemic index, the measure of how fast blood sugar rises, it has been offered as an alternative sweetener for diabetics. Some studies have shown fructose to cause trouble for diabetics because it can reduce insulin

C content. The unripe seed pods can be used in place of capers. Marigold, calendula and the flowers of my going-to-seed arugula, mustard, chives and cilantro will also adorn my summer salads.

Ever wonder why we've got so many dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) here? The Europeans brought them along as a medicinal herb. I don't eat the flowers of this one, though. They're way too bitter, even for my taste. However, the leaves go nicely in salads. Don't add too many and tear them up. Dandelion leaves actually seem to taste better before the plant goes to flower and if they've been grown in some shade. They're also delicious sautéed with chard and kale.

Native Americans (and others, of course) have been said to eat the Day Lily (*Hemerocallis fulva*) bulbs and flowers as a regular part of their diet. Horticulturists say the entire plant is edible. I've yet to try that one. There are plenty in my yard, though, so perhaps I'll give

it a taste yet this year. The books say they should be cooked, but a friend likes the flower petals pulled off individually and eaten raw. She likes their fresh, sweet crunchiness.

Another delicious and purportedly healthy flower is that of the yucca (*Yucca filamentosa*)



plant. One of my chiropractors recommended it to soothe my sore joints. I sautéed onions and garlic in olive oil and added the flowers of the yucca plant for just a moment at the end. Delicious!! Yucca and agave are in the same family (Agavaceae) and therefore have some of the same

properties.

And then, of course, there are Violets (*Viola odorata*). My grandmother used to make candied Violets. She grew the violets in her back yard in Chicago and would let me help paint and dust them with her. I think we just whipped a little egg white, painted each petal of the flower and then dusted them with very fine sugar. Wikipedia has a sugar and water recipe that avoids using raw egg whites. I've heard the flowers can have a calming effect when eaten or drunk as tea. Maybe that's why she let me eat so many.

Grandma also fed me tea of other flowers from her back yard: chamomile (*Anthemis nobilis*), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and red clover (*Trifolium pretense*). I think Grandma liked to calm me down. Lavender also goes ever so well in scones, cookies and mint tea.

Always eat flowers that haven't been sprayed with pesticides, herbicides or any toxic chemical. Picking the flowers in the local park for dinner probably isn't a good idea, because they may have been grown as ornamentals, with sprays not approved for consumption. But the flowers in your own yard might just end up on your dinner plate. What the heck. It's luxurious. Flowers were once the food of royalty. Try 'em. You might like them!!

There's a wonderful chart online at <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/garden/07237.html> With a detailed list of what flower garden plants are edible, how to eat them and what they taste like. It's also got a chart that includes what NOT to eat.

Edible Beauty. What a fine concept!



## Agave

continued

efficiency. But, in agave syrup, fructose occurs together with inulin fiber which may positively affect blood sugar-related conditions. Anyone under care for diabetes should consult their health care provider before using agave sweeteners. The glycemic index is only one measure of how sugars affect on your body and there may be several other factors to consider when choosing your sweetener. Also, since fructose metabolism mainly takes place in the liver, it is wise to limit excess fructose consumption if you have compromised liver function or other metabolic disorders.

Not all agave products on the market are equal, so don't be fooled by price. Inspect labels carefully and look for only pure certified-organic agave syrup. LifeSource carries only organic and naturally produced agave sweeteners from inspected farms and producers in Mexico. There are no added corn sweeteners or anything other than natural ingredients in the products we carry. Aunt Patty's, Madhava, and Wholesome Foods are all respected names in the natural foods industry and they use only certified organic agave syrup in their products.



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