



TIME

Ain't That Sweet!

A slew of specialty sugars are taking chefs beyond brown and white

By STACIE STUKIN



ROSE LEVY BERANBAUM knows from baking. The author of the million-copies-sold *The Cake Bible* spends most days thinking about what to do with flour, butter and sugar. That task became even more satisfying about eight years ago when she discovered a fleet of organic and unrefined sugars that have distinct flavors. "Sugar is no longer just a sweetener," she says of this new class of specialty sugars from exotic locales like Costa Rica and Paraguay. "It's now a flavoring ingredient that brings a whole new spectrum to the artist's palette of taste."

Recently, these sugars have made their way onto the shelves of health-food stores like Whole Foods and gourmet specialty outlets like Trader Joe's, Williams-Sonoma and Dean & DeLuca. As a result, home cooks can now take advantage of the caramel, crunchy tang of large-crystal, raw-cane demerara from Malawi or the toffee-infused taste of dark, sticky muscovado from Mauritius. Simon Cutts, bulk-foods manager for the Wild Oats national specialty chain of natural-food stores, says the consumer demand for these sugars mirrors the organic-food boom, with sales growing at a rate of 25% a year. "Once customers taste these sugars," he says, "they find it shocking to go back to the plain white stuff."

Conventionally refined sugar is snowy white because all the natural molasses has been extracted from the cane, leaving behind fine, pearly, sweet crystals. Often sugar is made especially white by filtering it through charred bovine bones—a refining process that causes vegetarians and vegans to seek other options. And while brown sugar is ostensibly brown because of the molasses content, much of the brown sugar sold in supermarkets (especially sugar that

comes from beets) is really what's called painted sugar, or white sugar that has been sprayed with a brown-colored syrup.

Unrefined and organic varieties come in many different colors and crystal shapes. There are dark, rich gooey browns, sticky blonds and even fine-grain off-white varieties. They may be new to Americans, but they have been available in Europe for decades. British chefs like cookbook author

"Some chefs feel so strongly about these products that they have endorsed the Wholesome Sweeteners brand, which is one of several companies that distribute these sugars in the U.S."

Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver, host of the Food Network's *The Naked Chef*, have regularly used them in their sweet and savory recipes. Lawson applauds their arrival in America, saying "If you bake, you're really limiting yourself by using just white or brown sugar. And if you're an adult with a sweet tooth, you want something that's more than sweet. You want something with strength and flavor." She loves to use a light muscovado sugar for her butterscotch layer cake ("You get the butterscotch flavor by

doing nothing except using that sugar") or for marinades ("The big flavor of smoky muscovado is brilliant for barbecue").

Some of America's top restaurants are also eschewing conventional white and brown sugars and favoring varieties that are less refined and chemical-free and subsequently easier on the environment to produce. "I make a real effort to buy legitimate brown sugars as opposed to those that are

dyed," says Mary Canales, pastry chef at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., which has a reputation for supporting small organic farmers and using minimally processed ingredients. Canales suggests using large-crystal demerara to add a crunchy topping to muffins or cookies; she also recommends dark brown muscovado as the perfect complement to simple baked fruit.

Some chefs feel so strongly about these products that they have endorsed the Wholesome Sweeteners brand, which is one

CONNECTIONS



1. Light brown muscovado



2. Organic turbinado



3. Demerara



4. Raw-sugar crystals



5. Organic molasses



6. Milled golden cane



7. Organic light brown



8. Organic dark brown



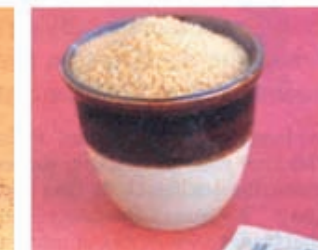
9. Dark brown molasses



10. Organic sugar



11. Organic sucanat



12. Raw cane sugar

1. Has a hunt of butterscotch and fudge flavors 2. Evaporated cane juice that is not chemically refined 3. Crunchy crystals that sparkle 4. Subtly sweet from the sugarcane's natural molasses 5. Rich, full-bodied and syrupy, with a touch of caramel 6. Dry and unrefined for everyday use 7. Soft and moist 8. Like organic light brown, ideal for baking 9. Treacly with a sticky texture 10. Light and free-flowing, with minimal clumping and hardening 11. porous dehydrated whole-cane juice 12. not blended or colored; suitable for beverages

of several companies that distribute these sugars in the U.S. Marcus Samuelsson of Aquavit restaurant in New York City is one of those chefs, and although he hasn't been paid for it, his picture appears on the back of a package of a raw cane sugar from Malawi, along with his recipe for moist, chewy gingersnaps. "I got hooked on these sugars about two years ago," says Samuelsson. "I'm always looking for good-quality ingredients, and these sugars have a flavor that can really stand out in a recipe."

Nigel Willerton, CEO of Wholesome Sweeteners, based in Sugar Land, Texas, attributes the rising popularity of specialty sugars to consumers who are more concerned about the source of their food, the environment and the use of pesticides and herbicides. Wholesome Sweeteners' sales of these sugars, which the company imports from five countries, have quadrupled in four years, reaching \$26 million this year. Despite

their growing market share, organic- and unrefined-sugar sales still account for a tiny share—about \$39 million of the \$10 billion-a-year U.S. sugar market. And only one company, Florida Crystals, produces organic sugar in the U.S.

Sugar is on no one's list of health foods, but are specialty types better for you than the common white stuff? Certainly the organic varieties contain fewer additives like pesticides. Some fans of these sweeteners also argue that a little goes a longer way to satisfy a sweet tooth. "Refined sugar is cheap filler with no flavor," argues Gretchen Goehrend, founder and president of India Tree of Seattle, one of the first companies to bring these sugars into the U.S. "If you get a mouthful of dark muscovado, you're not going to forget that rich and wonderful taste. It makes the meal more satisfying, so you'll eat less."

Goehrend's theory can be put to the test at Boule in Los Angeles, where bite-size

pastries offer big rewards. While diet consciousness is far from Michelle Myers' mind, the pastry chef and candymaker has modeled her artful patisserie after the neighborhood versions she visited in Paris during her tenure at Le Cordon Bleu. But specialty sugars have added a whole new dimension to her baking. There are little gems, such as her dainty financier cake made with pineapple muscovado jam; brioche that sparkles with demerara sugar; and kouing-aman, a buttery, caramelized cinnamon-flake pastry.

Chefs like Myers and Beranbaum can't hide their enthusiasm for these sweet discoveries. Beranbaum even asserts that the new sugars can help simplify the art of baking because they add spectacular flavor without requiring complex skills. "For me," marvels Beranbaum, "finding these sugars is like being an astronomer who has discovered a new planet or a mathematician who has solved a new theorem." It's that sweet.