

PENNY SAVER NEWS

Sept 18, 2014

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Yet Another Sugar?

We do like our sweets. We just don't want the calories or the extra weight that comes with them. That means that we are wide open to every new kind of sugar that promises sweet flavor either with more nutrition and more health benefits, or with fewer bad effects. While medical science says that the low-calorie sweeteners have been well-tested and found to be safe, the popular press continues to question their use. So, here comes the latest version of a 'natural' sugar that's 'better for us' - coconut sugar! At least they claim it is...

What is it anyway? Coconut sugar, or sometimes called coconut palm sugar or coco sugar, is made from the juice of the buds of coconut palms. The buds on palms are slashed and the juice that comes from the cuts is collected in little bamboo buckets. When enough juice has been collected in a big kettle it is boiled to evaporate the water. What's left behind is initially a thick, sweet syrup. More slow boiling removes the rest of the water, until a cake of sugar is left. Like maple syrup, that is all the processing there is.

Coconut sugar has been made this way for hundreds of years across southern Asia, from Thailand to the Philippines. I watched a farm owner collect his bamboo buckets of juice several years ago when I went to Thailand, so I know it is still being done on a family level there. Now that coconut sugar is getting so much attention here, it has probably become a more commercial enterprise, purified and packaged for us.

Does that make it 'natural'? There's no legal definition of natural, so it's your judgment about whether that is little enough processing or not. It's certainly not just harvested like a fruit. Then we would simply buy bottles of watery juice.

As for the 'more nutritious' parts of the claim, they're pretty watery too. Yes, the juice from the cut buds does have more than just sugar. There are a few minerals, such as magnesium and potassium that help lower our blood pressure. There is zinc and iron, and some vitamin C. But who eats sugar to get vitamin C or iron? And how much sugar would you need to eat?

One company advertises on the claim that their coconut sugar has "29 mg of magnesium in

100 grams of sugar". Well, would you sit down and eat 2 tablespoons of straight sugar to get that much mineral? Even if you did, what would it benefit you? To get your Daily Value of magnesium you'd need to about 8¾ cups of sugar! Besides the weight you'd gain your blood sugar would be so high you'd probably need a hospital bed too. Almost all the sugar is sucrose, the same as the white stuff in a bag of sugar. It's about the same as in a box of brown sugar, or a bottle of maple syrup. There is no fiber to slow down how fast it's absorbed, so the glycemic index is just as high too.

The other thing about coco sugar that is high is the price. Compared to the cents per pound that we pay for white sugar, coco sugar ranges from \$4 to \$30 per pound! That alone might be enough to keep us from overdosing on it. But then, it doesn't taste quite a sweet as white sugar, so we'll need more of it. Better buy 2 pounds...

Or, if you value your health (or your pocketbook), leave it on the shelf. Limit your use of any sugar. Reeducate your taste buds to less sugar in your diet, and eat fruits for your sweets. They're the real deal when it comes to naturally sweet.

If you like the coconut flavor, here's dinner tonight. There's not much to prepare, but do leave time for it to cook. Serve over brown rice or rice noodles. Enjoy!

Coconut Curried Chicken and Veggies

1½ pounds boneless skinless chicken	1 teaspoon salt and pepper
1½ tbsp vegetable oil	2 tbsp curry powder
½ medium onion, thinly sliced	2 cloves garlic, crushed
1 (14 ounce) can lite coconut milk	1 (8 ounce) can tomato sauce
1 (14.5 ounce) can stewed, diced tomatoes	3 tablespoons sugar
1 bag frozen stir-fry vegetable blend of your choice, or 2 C frozen green peas	

Cut chicken into 1/2-inch chunks. Season chicken pieces with salt and pepper. Heat oil and curry powder in a large skillet over medium-high heat for two minutes. Stir in onions and garlic, and cook 1 minute more. Add chicken, tossing lightly to coat with curry oil. Reduce heat to medium, and cook for 7 to 10 minutes, or until chicken is no longer pink in center and juices run clear. Add coconut milk, tomatoes, tomato sauce, and sugar to pan, stir to combine. Cover and simmer, stirring occasionally, approximately 30 minutes. Add stir-fry vegetables, stir and cook until vegetables are tender. Serves 6.

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