

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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One More New Sweetener – Monk Fruit

Another exotic fruit from the other side of the world is making its way into our foods! This time the newcomer is Monk Fruit, and it's being used as a calorie-free sweetener. You may see it monk fruit extract being marketed as PureLo®, PureFruit®, Nectresse® or under other names on the internet, but it's all basically the same thing, dried monk fruit juice. And it is very sweet!

Monk fruit grows on vines in southern China or northern Thailand. The plant is related to gourds and cucumbers, and the fruit looks like a little green or brown ball. For most of the centuries that it's been used people have dried the fruit to preserve it, then boiled pieces of dry fruit in water or with foods to make drinks, soups and home remedies. In the last century it made it to the US, mostly in Oriental stores for people who remembered it from Asia. But that sweet taste attracted the attention of business.

Several companies have now developed ways to grow it in much larger amounts. And of course they've found ways to extract the sweet part so it can be used in lots of other foods. Drying the fruit can create some unpleasant flavors, so the commercial extracts are made from fresh ripe or slightly green fruits. Most of the time hot water is used to pull the sweet chemicals out of the pulp. Then ultra-filtration (what's used at the water purification plant in Apollo Beach) is used to get rid of the water and impurities.

The basic chemicals in monk fruit that taste sweet are not digestible. That means they have no calories. And they're about 200 times sweeter than the same amount of sugar would be. That is very attractive to foods companies, and to those of us who want to eat our cake and stay slender too.

Another benefit of being nondigestible is that the bacteria in our guts can't use it either. If they're not growing any faster than usual then we won't have any more gas than usual. Some of the research that's been done on monk fruit did find that if they gave lab rats huge, humongous amounts of fruit extract they did get some diarrhea. But the amounts would be as if we drank 1500 cans of diet

soda sweetened with monk fruit in a day! Anyone who drank that much would have diarrhea just from all the liquid! So that's not something to worry about.

Fresh monk fruit does have sugars, pectin, some vitamins and some minerals. The purified extract has had all of those removed. So we can't expect to get our vitamins, antioxidants or other nutrients from monk fruit sweeteners. But there's a lot of research being done on some of the other ingredients in monk fruit, since it's been used in home remedies for centuries in Asia.

The way we're most likely to see monk fruit extract in the grocery store is under the brand name Nectresse®. This is being sold by the company that also sells Splenda®, but Nectresse® is completely different. It has monk fruit extract plus a tiny bit of sugar, molasses and erythritol. (That's a natural fruit sugar alcohol, and it has no alcohol.) The amounts of sugar and molasses are so tiny that it still has no calories. Just ¼ teaspoon of Nectresse® is as sweet as 1 tsp of sugar (which has 15 calories).

One last good thing about monk fruit extract is that it doesn't break down or lose its flavor when it is heated. So it can be used in cooking too. Like Splenda® it won't make your cookies turn brown when they're baked, but it will make them taste sweet. And like Splenda® or other sweeteners, a recipe for cookies or jam or anything else that uses a lot of sugar will make a lot less without the sugar. But if you want something to sweeten the tomato sauce or a pot of chili, it will work just fine.

This cute snack idea for the kids does not need any sweeteners other than what Mother Nature put in the fruit. Make some before they get home from school, and watch their faces light up when they find the secret filling.

Apple Secrets

2 small apples

3 Tbsp peanut or almond butter

1 Tbsp mashed banana

1 tsp raisins or dried cherries

Wash the apples. Slice the top third off each apple and save. Do not peel the apples. Use a spoon to remove the seeds and cores of the apples and make a hollow space in the middle. Mash the peanut butter, banana and raisins together in a small bowl. Push half of it into each apple. Put the tops back on the apples. Serves 2.

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