



PALEO POSSIBILITIES:

Ingredient solutions for sweet,
Paleo-friendly treats

In the quest to eat a simple, healthy diet, some people are turning to the eating style of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, otherwise known as the Paleo diet. Though there are no hard-and-fast figures on how many followers the diet has, it has gained attention in recent years as consumers seek novel dietary solutions.

Around 2014, the Paleo diet was thought to be gaining mainstream status when Google reported that it was the most searched food regimen, with 6.5 million searches in 2013 and 2014. While popular, the trend is also controversial.^{1,2} It has been considered one of the most difficult diet regimens to follow. In 2014, *US News and World Report* rated it last among best overall diets, calling it “unrealistic.”³ A meta-analysis review of clinical studies does indicate some promise for the Paleo diet, although more research is needed into its long-term effects.⁴

While no one knows for sure how many people are turning to a Paleo or modified Paleo diet, the founder of the movement, Loren Cordain, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus at Colorado State University and author of *The Paleo Diet*, has estimated that it has close to one million devotees, and more recently it has been pegged at close to three million.^{5,6} Although the diet does not actually involve going out and gathering nuts and seeds oneself, the premise is somewhat difficult and could be financially challenging.⁷ The diet eschews processed foods, legumes and grains in favor of foods that are high in protein, such as grass-fed meats, fish, and seafood, and non-starchy fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, eggs and healthy oils from avocado, coconut, flaxseeds, olives and walnuts.⁸

The diet typically espouses whole foods and low-glycemic-load foods. Nevertheless, it turns out that the ancient hunter-gatherer had a sweet tooth, and would seek out natural forms of sweetness from fruits and other plants. Generally, the Paleo diet takes a dim view of too much sweet food, but many advocates recognize the need for an occasional sweet treat in a balanced Paleo diet and recommends a number of sweeteners in Paleo-friendly packaged foods or for use directly in recipes.

Here is the low-down on the most commonly used Paleo-friendly sweeteners from Paleo followers and authors Jane Barthelemy (*Good Morning Paleo* and *Paleo Desserts*) and Joel Runyon (*Ultimate Paleo Guide*):

Stevia Leaf Extract comes from the leaves of a plant species, *Stevia rebaudiana*. Some of the more traditional Paleo experts suggest that only raw, unprocessed stevia leaf extract is truly Paleo, and recommend only bulk dried leaves or a powder made from the leaves. However, raw stevia leaf extract is not approved for use in food and beverages. That is why for the most part Paleo advocates are enthusiastic about high-purity stevia leaf extract, because it has been generally recognized as safe by the FDA.

Erythritol is another sweetener that is gaining popularity for use in products that pass the Paleo test. A sugar alcohol, or polyol, it is naturally present in berries and certain vegetables. Erythritol is commercially made via a fermentation process. It can mask the aftertaste of intense sweeteners like stevia, so together the two could meet Paleo standards in a product.

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Agave Nectar is another sweetener in the mixed category. It comes from the agave plant native to Mexico and the Southwestern U.S. Purists say only raw agave juice qualifies as a Paleo sweetener, objecting to the use of heat and other processing techniques in commercially made ingredients. Otherwise, agave fits well with Paleo philosophy, having a pleasant neutral taste and low glycemic index, making it useful for products such as Paleo-friendly ready-to-drink beverages and energy bars.

Inulin fiber comes from plants such as chicory root or Jerusalem artichoke, and is considered a naturally sourced Paleo sweetener. This complex, non-digestible carbohydrate has low impact on blood sugar levels and is also known to have prebiotic activity to help support digestion.

While the Paleo diet may not ever achieve true mainstream appeal, its principles may continue to gain momentum among dieters and in food manufacturing. As more consumers seek to further improve the healthfulness of their diet, the appeal of foods and products that meet the Paleo standard may become an option for those who only occasionally aspire to be modern-day hunter-gatherers.

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