



# CUCKOO FOR COCONUT SUGAR

By AnnMarie Mattila

*Photo by Johanna Le Pape*

**T**here's no denying white sugar often reigns supreme in most pastry kitchens—a quick glance at any standardized recipe would support this notion. But in the last few years, the push for alternatives from chefs and customers has turned the spotlight away from sucrose and towards more natural, less processed options. Among those is coconut sugar, with an uncanny ability to be both similar and different enough from white sugar to make it increasingly more popular.

Like many other alternatives, coconut sugar is minimally processed and often more environmentally sustainable. You simply boil sap from coconut palm flowers in order to evaporate the water. The sap maintains a lot of the naturally occurring nutrients, unlike granulated sugar from sugar cane or sugar beets. Coconut sugar also has a lower glycemic index and is vegan-friendly, making it an excellent choice for customers with dietary restrictions.

What sets coconut sugar apart is just how easily it can mimic granulated sugar in most recipes. When Guittard developed their Santé baking chips with coconut sugar, their executive pastry chef Donald Wressell was surprised just how easy it was to use. “Somebody can grab a bag and start working with it, and they won't have any problems,” he notes. From brownies to even enrobing bonbons, the chocolate melts and reacts in the same way any as their other products would.

“Coconut sugar can often be used as a one-to-one substitute for granulated sugar,” explains Johanna Le Pape, pastry chef and author of *Patisserie Revolution*. When developing recipes, she does note that “slight adjustments might be needed depending on the recipe and the desired outcome.” Coconut sugar is naturally darker and maintains more moisture because it is less processed, so color, texture, and baking times may need to be tweaked accordingly.

Addison LaBonte, owner of Sweet Addison's, agrees that the one-to-one swap for granulated sugar works well in most baked goods like cookies. Organic coconut sugar is her favorite alternative to work with while developing products for her better-for-you brand. Her tip: “I highly recommend extra fine coconut sugar. It is much less grainy and gritty than regular coconut sugar.”



Photo by Guittard

One of the more significant differences when working with coconut sugar is the flavor. “Coconut sugar has a rich, caramel-like flavor,” explains LaBonte. When working with it, you have to keep that in mind, as it will be a noticeable difference to the palate. Le Pape notes that it “can enhance the flavor in certain recipes, like cookies, cakes, and muffins, but it might not be ideal for recipes where a neutral sweetness is desired.”

Of course, the unique flavor profile can work in a recipe’s favor, too. Le Pape says that it “adds depth to baked goods without being overly sweet. It’s an excellent choice for those looking for a more complex alternative to traditional sugar.” During his tenure at Gramercy Tavern,, chef Miro Uskokovic told Pastry Arts in 2018, “I like to use it in the fall



*Photo by Guittard*

*Photo by Sweet Addison’s*



and winter months as it has beautiful caramel and toffee overtones that go well with cold weather fruit like pears and apples.”

And while the increased popularity of and demand for coconut sugar is making it easier to source, the price continues to be a challenge. Particularly when inflation is increasing the cost of all goods, switching to coconut sugar may not be in the cards unless you play them right. Customers will pay for that privilege, but you have to educate them. “My customers love that I use coconut sugar instead of white sugar. You can taste the difference, and you don’t feel as bloated or groggy after!” exclaims LaBonte.

Some customers are looking for newness and differentiation, while others are looking to fill a dietary or environmental requirement. Coconut sugar feeds into both of those needs. It can also fuel creativity. “I think chefs and bakers are looking for different, something unique out there, something that gives them a little edge,” Wressell says. Experimenting with sugar alternatives is increasingly popular both in the kitchen and at the register, so why not start with a similar yet different choice of coconut sugar? A sweet new world may open up.