

Agave Nectar, A Sweetener for Any Occasion

Plus, how to make a granita margarita

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Agave juice was known to native Mexicans as “honey water.” Agave plants tend to be most familiar as the basis for tequila, although agave nectar is gaining ground in home kitchens as a wonderful alternative to traditional sweeteners. Agave nectar is made mainly from the juices extracted from the core of the agave plant, most often from blue agave, agave salmiana, agave americana and agave mapisaga. There are many other wild agaves that can also be utilized. The different species produce nectars of varying flavors. The juices are expressed from the core of the plants and then processed to produce the nectar. The juices destined to become light agave are filtered to produce a light neutral end product. After the juices are extracted, they are heated to break down the carbohydrates.



The main carbohydrate in agave juice is comprised of inulin-fructooligosaccharides, a complex form of fructose. There are two methods of processing, one using enzymes and one using hydrolysis, which are used to split the naturally occurring complex sugar in simple fructose and dextrose. Hydrolysis is commonly considered to be more efficient and to produce a more refined product. Once the juice has been processed, it is then reduced to a syrupy consistency. As with maple syrup, you can find a wide range of agave syrups on the market, ranging from a dark, almost molasses-like product to a light, simple syrup.



Since agave syrup is approximately 90 percent fructose, it is perceived to have a sweeter flavor than granulated sugar. Because it tastes sweeter you do not need to add as much to a recipe to obtain the same level of sweetness. This makes it an ideal product for people who are sugar-sensitive or watching calories but do not want to resort to artificial sweeteners to satisfy their sugar cravings. Most agave syrups available in the United States are organic, vegan, and kosher, making them appropriate to use for almost everyone.

Aside from the health benefits, from a culinary perspective, the main advantages of using agave

nectar are that it has a light viscosity and a high level of solubility. This means that it is easily incorporated into other ingredients regardless of temperature. It is perfect for bar applications as it can be stirred into cold or warm drinks and homogenizes easily. Agave nectar is shelf-stable and does not need to be refrigerated after opening. It can be used as a substitute for cane syrup, maple syrup, or molasses in any old-fashioned recipes and as an inverted sugar for modern applications. Because agave syrup is more intensely sweet than most traditional sweeteners, when making substitutions it's a good idea to reduce the volume by 25 percent and check the flavor before adding more. The light syrup provides a clean sweet taste that is useful for balancing recipes in both sweet and savory applications. The darker syrups lend their own intense flavors to dishes and can be seen as a chord of their own. We've listed a few sources for different varieties for you to explore. We love agave nectar and believe that once you begin using it you will find it an admirable addition to your pantry.



We've included a recipe for a granita margarita to help get you started with agave syrup. It's a fun, easy way to make a slightly different version of a classic cocktail. In this recipe we normally pair silver tequilas with light or golden agave, and aged tequilas with darker agaves that will work well with the more complex flavors.

Granita Margarita

Citrus Granita

4 ounces mixed lemon and lime juice (approximately 2 limes and 1 lemon)
2 ounces agave syrup
6 ounces cold water
a few grains of salt

Mix all ingredients together and taste for desired flavor. Add additional sweetener or citrus as needed. Pour into a shallow bowl or sixth pan and place in the freezer. After an hour ice crystals should be forming in your granita. Scrape the pan thoroughly with a fork and place back in the freezer. Repeat every half an hour or so until the mixture is fully frozen. If it seems to solid, just break it up with your fork to the desired consistency.

Granita Margarita (serves 2)

2 martini glasses
vanilla salt (optional)
lime slices
citrus granita
3 ounces tequila
4 ounces cold cream soda

Rim the martini glass with lime juice and salt. Fill glass halfway with granita. Combine tequila and soda in a shaker with ice. Shake thoroughly and pour over the granita. Squeeze lime slice over the drink and drop in to finish.

Sources:

Madhava Agave Nectar, available in many supermarkets.
Sweet Cactus Farms, Blue Weber Tequilana organic agave nectar
SunFood, Carries a variety of light and dark agave nectars.

