

Food Business News

INGREDIENT APPLICATIONS



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Sweet nostalgia

Honey, malt, molasses and sugar are welcome additions to comfort food

Natural sweeteners are set for success amid the rising popularity of comfort food. Think sugar in an apple pie that reminds the consumer of grandmother, chocolate malt drinks reminiscent of those found in malt shops or honey in a sweet and gooey cinnamon roll. A surge in comfort food's popularity came shortly after the unsettling COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"During tough times, many people turn to food for comfort and emotional support," said Kishan Vasani, co-founder and chief executive officer of Spoonshot, a food and beverage innovation intelligence company. "From 2016 until around mid-2019, interest in comfort food was pretty steady in the US, but during 2020, consumer interest in comfort food increased by 19%. Companies recognized that and are also responding: Business interest in comfort food went up by 61%."

Consumer interest in ingredients considered comforting has gone up by 31% over the past year, according to Spoonshot, which measures consumer interest using an algorithm that tracks relevant mentions and other attributes across

consumer news, social media, forums, and recipe, menu and product reviews.

"Consumer interest in ingredients associated with comfort, nostalgia or

ideas for honey, orange blossom honey, molasses, brown sugar, turbinado sugar, coconut sugar, maple syrup, cane sugar, golden syrup, palm sugar and agave

'Consumer interest in ingredients associated with comfort, nostalgia or childhood went up by a whopping 115% over the last year.'

— Kishan Vasani,
Spoonshot



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childhood went up by a whopping 115% over the last year," Mr. Vasani said. "This points to a growing movement toward comfort from food ingredients."

Double-digit growth came in the following sweeteners: coconut sugar (up 49%), brown sugar (44%), maple syrup (33%), palm sugar (25%), agave nectar (22%) and honey (11%).

Spoonshot's proprietary Concept Generator technology created product

nectar. Possible applications for the sweeteners include sauces, spreads, condiments, bread, cakes, pastries, desserts, cookies, cereal, granola, cereal bars, French toast, pancakes, waffles, juices and smoothies as well as sweeteners for beverages, including tea, coffee and cocktails.

"Consumer interest in these particular sweeteners had actually been declining because of people trying to cut down on their sugar consumption," Mr. Vasani

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said. “As consumers started to bake and cook at home during the pandemic, there was a bit of a revival. Over the last year, consumer interest in these sweeteners went up by about 18%, and it’s expected to continue to grow modestly (at 3%) in the coming year as well.”

Honey’s familiarity

Honey claimed the No. 1 spot among Americans as the most preferred sweetener for the first time in a “Consumer attitudes and usage study 2020” from the National Honey Board, Frederick, Colo. The study asked consumers to choose their favorite from among several common sweeteners, including white sugar, brown sugar, several non-caloric sweeteners, raw sugar, monk fruit and maple syrup. Consumers noted attributes like “natural,” “unprocessed,” “good for the environment,” “organic,” “good source of antioxidants” and “flavorful” as reasons for honey’s top ranking.

“Honey has a familiarity that lends itself to comfort during uncertain times,” said Catherine Barry, director of marketing for the National Honey Board. “Food and beverage manufacturers know this and often promote the ingredient on product packaging. Consumers understand where honey comes from and its value as an all-natural sweetener.”

Consumers associate malt-based sweeteners with wholesomeness and nostalgia, said Amy Targan, president of Malt Products Corp., Saddle Brook, NJ.

“They often associate malt with homey and familiar experiences such as classic malt shops and drinking Ovaltine at home,” she said. “These warm and positive feelings, often about a simpler past, make consumers receptive to messages about how malt-based sweeteners are all-natural, nutritive and less processed than many if not most alternatives. In addition, malt-based sweeteners do not contain fructose, which many consumers shy away from.”

Ms. Targan also serves as president of International Molasses, a sister company of Malt Products.

“Molasses is similar to malt in that it has a long history of being in American pantries and is therefore associated with positive feelings,” she said. “Because of the long existence of molasses, customers are able to easily comprehend that it is not a highly-processed sweetener. Molasses’ complex flavor itself tells the story of its natural origins, and those subtle, darker tasting notes along with molasses’ rich color are the key to its continued popularity.”

“Permissible indulgence” is another trend that aligns with several natural sweeteners that have positive attributes, which give consumers permission to indulge.

Malt Products Corp. and International Molasses offer MaltRite, OatRite and CaneRite sweeteners that contain amino acids, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, Ms. Targan said.

Honey contains vitamins, minerals, amino acids and antioxidants, Ms. Barry said.

“Flavonoids and phenolic acids, which act as antioxidants, also are found in honey,” she said. “The amount and type of these compounds depends largely on the floral source. Honey also is a natural source of carbohydrates, providing 17 grams per tablespoon, which makes it

Honey claimed the top spot in a National Honey Board consumer survey of sweetener preferences.



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ideal for your working muscles. Since carbohydrates are the primary fuel the body uses, honey can help maintain muscle glycogen, also known as stored carbohydrates, which gives athletes the boost they need when they need it most.”

Positive perceptions of sugar

Even sugar may be viewed positively when it comes to comfort foods.

“Comforting foods and beverages are deeply rooted in nostalgia and positive memories that people associate with these products,” said Shawn Sprinkle, manager ingredient applications – beverages for Chicago-based ADM. “At the heart of the more indulgent comfort foods and beverages, such as ice cream, is sugar. As the original natural, bulking sweetener, sugar can be very appealing to consumers when they’re seeking

offerings that give them a sense of solace. On top of that, foundational syrups frequently used in sodas, baked goods and confections may also evoke feelings of comfort in shoppers.”

ADM now offers SweetRight, a reduced-sugar glucose syrup that helps to reduce added sugars, he said. The sweetener joins ADM’s tapioca and rice syrups.

“Each one offers similar functionality to corn syrup, including bulking and binding, as well as viscosity for ease in processing,” Mr. Sprinkle said. “Moreover, these reduced-sugar specialty syrup solutions can be used in comforting foods like frozen desserts, confections, snacks, bars and cookies to decrease added sugar. Plus, our tapioca and rice syrups are both non-GMO ingredients perfect for clean label product positioning.”

International Molasses recently introduced CaneRite panela, a free-flowing powder sweetener made from the freshly squeezed juice of the whole sugar cane plant. Unlike conventional “raw sugar” products, CaneRite panela is unrefined and non-centrifuged, so that it authentically and comprehensively retains all the cane plant’s original flavor and nutritional benefits, Ms. Targan said.

“CaneRite panela is an attractive sweetener option for a variety of food applications, including spices, barbecue and other sauces, cookies, bakery items, bars and confectionery items,” Ms. Targan said. “For solids, CaneRite panela offers excellent binding properties and a natural brown coloring with caramel notes. For all applications, it aligns with non-GMO and clean label ingredient claims increasingly popular with modern consumers.”

Batory Foods, Rosemont, Ill., offers a full line of clean label, nutritive sweeteners that consumers recognize from their pantry, including granulated and liquid sugar, brown sugar, honey, molasses, maple syrup, etc., said Melissa Ridell, head of innovation and technical services. Also available are more commercially used sweeteners such as tapioca syrup, brown rice syrup and invert sugar.

Ms. Ridell said her No. 1 comfort ingredient would be sugar.

“Eating a slice of grandma’s home-baked apple pie, licking a popsicle on a hot, summer day, sugar is found in almost everything,” she said. “It’s a staple and is everything that screams childhood, which was ‘comforting’ for me.” **FBN**

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