

HONEY

This weather has me fighting a sore throat and the sniffles, so I've been drinking hot tea with lemon and honey. And that got me to thinking about nature's sweetener. Honey is a rich golden liquid, produced by honey bees. The bees feast on flowers, collecting the flower nectar in their mouths. The nectar mixes with special enzymes in the bees' saliva that turns it into honey. The bees then carry the honey back to their hive, where they deposit it into the cells of the hive's walls. The constant fluttering of their wings provides the ventilation to reduce the moisture content of honey, making it ready for consumption.

Honey comes in a range of colors, including white, amber, red brown, and almost black. The color and flavor of honey depends on the type of flower nectar from which it was made. While the most common honeys are made from clover, heather, alfalfa, and acacia flowers, honey can be made from a variety of different flowers, including thyme, lavender, and orange blossom. Most commercial honey is a blend of different types, but single flower honeys are also available. Generally speaking, the darker the color of the honey, the stronger the flavor.

Honey is one of the oldest foods known to man. A prehistoric rock painting in a cave in Spain, over 10,000 years old, depicts two men gathering honey. All over the world, honey was used for cooking, medicinal, cosmetic and religious purposes. In medicine, honey was used to treat wounds, as it has antiseptic and antibacterial properties. By itself or with lemon juice, it is nature's cough syrup. It is full of antioxidants and helps fight cancer, it lowers cholesterol, and for diabetics, it causes a significantly lower rise in blood sugar than does refined sugar.

In religion, there are over 73 mentions of honey in the Bible, including the famous description in Exodus of the Promised Land as a land of milk and honey. In the Jewish tradition, honey is the symbol for the New Year, and apple slices dipped in honey are eaten at Rosh Hashana, or Jewish New Year.

Buddhists tell the story that while in the wilderness, a monkey brought Buddha some honey to eat. That gift is celebrated by Buddhists giving honey to monks during the festival of Madhu Purnima. In Islam, the Qu'ran mentions rivers of honey, and Mohammed recommended honey for healing purposes. The ancient Egyptians used honey for embalming their dead, and the ancient Romans paid their taxes in honey.

Honey was expensive, however, and only the wealthy could afford to use much of it in cooking. Honey maintained its paramount place as nature's sweetener until comparatively recently, when the discovery of refining sugar from sugar cane or sugar beets made sugar considerably less expensive and consequently much more available. However honey still continues to be used in cooking and baking. Honey is the main ingredient of the alcoholic beverage mead, also known as honey wine. And it's also added as an additional sweetener to many beers.

I generally store honey in the refrigerator, but you don't really need to as long as it's in an airtight container and in a cool, dry place. If it has crystallized, simply put the jar of honey in a pot of hot water for about 15 minutes. Don't microwave it, as the microwave process changes the chemical structure of the honey and changes the taste.

You can use honey instead of sugar in most recipes. However, as honey is sweeter than sugar, you'll need to use less—one-half to three-quarters of a cup of honey for each cup of sugar. Also, as honey has some liquid content, reduce the amount of cooking liquid in the recipe by $\frac{1}{4}$ cup for each cup of sugar replaced. And as honey causes foods to brown more easily, reduce your cooking temperature by about 25 degrees.

For a quick and delicious dessert, core an apple and cut it into slices, either peeled or not. Drizzle some honey over the slices and serve. For a more elegant dessert, put a slice of feta cheese on a plate. Drizzle some honey over the cheese, and top with some chopped pistachio nuts. Or blend up some ricotta cheese and honey in your blender or food processor, and pour it over sliced fruits, especially slices of peeled melon and banana. As a kid, I loved sandwiches of peanut butter, sliced bananas, and honey. Spoon some honey into a small container of plain yogurt, and then dump that over your breakfast cereal.