

The Sweet Power of Sugar

Sandra Mian

Food Engineer, Quebec, Canada

Today it is difficult to imagine that not so long ago sugar was a luxury good, affordable only to the very rich and powerful.

Sugar is used not only in the manufacturing of candies and sweets, but also in savory dishes, baked products, as a preserving agent, in medicines and so on. The uses of sugar in food and medicine have not changed so much in the last centuries, but the users, the quantities and the symbolism of sugar surely have.

This paper can't completely explain how and why all these transformations happened and their impact. Instead, we will try to understand a little more about the history and the symbolism of sugar and its place in our modern world.

THE INNATE TASTE FOR SWEETS

Human beings learn most of their likes and dislikes, so instinct plays only a small part in human behavior. Taste is also culturally acquired (or learned), except for a small number of taste sensations that are innately recognized. Sweetness is one of these few exceptions.

There used to be a lot of discussion about whether the preference for sweets was innate or whether they were preferred

because milk is sweet. In his 1977 work, Steiner demonstrated that newborn infants reacted with pleasure to a sugar solution before they had the opportunity to taste anything sweet.

If in the course of evolution human beings have acquired an innate taste for sweets, it must indicate something special for our species. Some of the most reliable explanations are that the sweet taste serves as an indicator to the body for the calories it requires and that everything that is sweet is harmless. In fact, there is no natural poison that is sweet and maybe human beings developed the taste for sweets based on the assumption that everything that is sweet is also edible.

THE SYMBOLISM OF SWEETNESS

Human beings use food in more ways than simply as nutrients. Humans use food symbolically. Eating is a daily reaffirmation of cultural identity, as when one dresses in traditional clothing or speaks in his or her mother tongue.

A symbol is something that suggests something else due to relationship, association or convention. Many foods are very powerful symbols, such as bread for instance. When a food becomes a symbol, ➤

Mian works as a consultant for food companies in Quebec, Canada, in the development of new products, food anthropology and food history information.



Sandra Mian