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Sugar Is Back on Food Labels, This Time as a Selling Point

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

Sugar, the nutritional pariah that dentists and dietitians have long reviled, is enjoying a second act, dressed up as a natural, healthful ingredient.

From the tomato sauce on a Pizza Hut pie called "The Natural," to the just-released soda Pepsi Natural, some of the biggest players in the American food business have started, in the last few months, replacing high-fructose corn syrup with old-fashioned sugar.

ConAgra uses only sugar or honey in its new Healthy Choice All Natural frozen entrees. Kraft Foods recently removed the corn sweetener from its salad dressings, and is working on its Lunchables line of portable meals and snacks.

The turnaround comes after three decades during which high-fructose corn syrup had been gaining on sugar in the American [diet](#). Consumption of the two finally drew even in 2003, according to the Department of Agriculture. Recently, though, the trend has reversed. Per capita, American adults ate about 44 pounds of sugar in 2007, compared with about 40 pounds of high-fructose corn syrup.

"Sugar was the old devil, and high-fructose corn syrup is the new devil," said Marcia Mogelonsky, a senior analyst at Mintel International, a market-research company.

With sugar sales up, the Sugar Association last year ended its Sweet by Nature campaign, which pointed out that sugar is found in fruits and vegetables, said Andy Briscoe, president of the association. "Obviously, demand is moving in the right direction so we are taking a break," Mr. Briscoe said.

Blamed for [hyperactivity](#) in children and studied as an addictive substance, sugar has had its share of image problems. But the widespread criticism of high-fructose corn syrup — the first lady, [Michelle Obama](#), has said she will not give her children products made with it — has made sugar look good by comparison.

Most scientists do not share the perception. Though research is still under way, many nutrition and [obesity](#) experts say sugar and high-fructose corn syrup are equally bad in excess. But, as is often the case with competing food claims, the battle is as much about marketing as it is about science.

Some shoppers prefer cane or beet sugar because it is less processed. High-fructose corn syrup is produced by a complex series of chemical reactions that includes the use of three enzymes and caustic soda.

Others see the pervasiveness of the inexpensive sweetener as a symbol of the ill effects of government subsidies given to large agribusiness interests like corn growers.

But the most common argument has to do with the rapid rise of obesity in the United States, which began in the 1980s, not long after industrial-grade high-fructose corn syrup was invented. As the amount of the sweetener in the American diet has expanded, so have Americans.

Although the price differential has since dropped by about half, high-fructose corn syrup came on the market as much as 20 percent cheaper than sugar. And it was easier to transport. As a result, the sweetener soon turned up in all kinds of products, including soda, bread, yogurt, frozen foods and spaghetti sauce.

But with sugar newly ascendant, the makers of corn syrup are fighting back. Last fall, the Corn Refiners Association mounted a multimillion-dollar defense, making sure that an advertisement linking to the association's Web site, sweetsurprise.com, pops up when someone types "sugar" or "high-fructose corn syrup" into some search engines.

In one television advertisement, a mother pours fruit punch into a cup while another scolds her because the punch contains high-fructose corn syrup. When pressed to explain why it is so bad, the complaining mother is portrayed as a speechless fool.

Audrae Erickson, president of the Corn Refiners Association, said consumers were being duped.

"When they discover they are being misled into thinking these new products are healthier, that's the interesting angle," Ms. Erickson said in an interview.

Although researchers are looking into the effects of fructose on liver function, insulin production and other possible contributors to excess weight gain, no major studies have made a definitive link between high-fructose corn syrup and poor health. The [American Medical Association](http://www.ama-assn.org) says that when it comes to obesity, there is no difference between the syrup and sugar.

And, Ms. Erickson added, the [Food and Drug Administration](http://www.fda.gov) considers both sweeteners natural.

Dr. Robert H. Lustig, a pediatric endocrinologist at the University of California, San Francisco Children's Hospital, said: "The argument about which is better for you, sucrose or HFCS, is garbage. Both are equally bad for your health."

Both sugar and high-fructose corn syrup are made from glucose and fructose. The level of fructose is about 5 percent higher in the corn sweetener.

Dr. Lustig studies the health effects of fructose, particularly on the liver, where it is metabolized. Part of his research shows that too much fructose — no matter the source — affects the liver in the same way too much alcohol does.

But all of that is irrelevant to some food manufacturers, who are switching to sugar as a result of extensive taste testing and consumer surveys.

"For consumers, their perception is reality," said Jim Sieple, a senior vice president for Log Cabin syrup, a 120-year-old brand in the Pinnacle Foods Group that this month announced it had stopped using high-fructose corn syrup.

Sugar's comeback is not entirely a backlash against the corn sweetener. Market researchers say that with the economy so unsettled, people want to control what they can. Choosing organic, less processed or so-called natural foods is a relatively inexpensive way to do that.

"Rightly or wrongly, that means consumers are more attracted to sugar," said Kevin Higar, senior manager at Technomics, a market research company.

Chefs and connoisseurs have also driven sugar's rehabilitation. Although even a sugar expert would be hard pressed to tell the difference between the taste of cane and beet sugar, some enthusiasts have elevated cane sugar to near cult status.

The Coke that is made from sugar for Jews who avoid corn during [Passover](#) has become so popular among cane-sugar fans that some stores have taken to rationing it.

At Jason's, a chain of delis with 200 restaurants in 27 states, cane sugar has replaced high-fructose corn syrup in everything except a few carbonated beverages. "Part of this is a huge rebellion against HFCS," said Daniel Helfman, a spokesman for the chain, "but part of it is taste."

To researchers and nutritionists who study obesity and the effects of sugar on the body, the resurrection of sugar is maddening.

Pat Crawford of the Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley, remembers when sugar was such a loaded word that cereal makers changed the name of products like Sugar Pops to Corn Pops.

Even though overall consumption of caloric sweeteners is starting to drop, Dr. Crawford says an empty calorie is still an empty calorie. And it does not matter whether people think sugar is somehow "retro," a word used to promote new, sugar-based versions of Pepsi and Mountain Dew called Throwback.

"If people really want to go back to where we were, that means not putting sugar in everything," she said. "It means keeping it to desserts."

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