

So Many Holiday Treats



When you think about holidays of days gone by, what are the memories you cherish most? I remember skating, skiing, snowshoeing, and tobogganing. I remember reading stories, singing songs, making gingerbread houses, and decorating. But one of my very favorite holiday pastimes was baking cookies and other treats with my mom and my grandma. The key ingredients were butter, eggs, sugar, and white flour. While you can purchase plant-based butter and eggs, they don't qualify as whole foods. If you are at a loss as to how to navigate the holiday treat world as a whole food plant-based eater, check out So Many Cooks in the Kitchen holiday show – it will pave the way to a world of crave-worthy treats.

So, how do you replace the usual ingredients in baking? While not all potential replacements work in every recipe, you can experiment on your own or try some well-tested plant-based offerings. Here are basic guidelines for replacing animal products and highly refined products in your baking.

1. **Milk and buttermilk.** This one is easy because there are so many amazing plant-based alternatives, including almond, cashew, hemp, oat, pea, and soy. Read the labels and select unsweetened products. Another option is to make your own nut or seed milk using a cup of nuts and 4 cups of water (you can add a pinch of salt, if desired). To make buttermilk using a plant-milk, simply add 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar to 1 cup milk and let stand for about 10 minutes.
2. **Yogurt.** Select a non-dairy cultured yogurt – almond, cashew, coconut, oat, and soy all work well. Make your own or buy an unsweetened variety at the market.
3. **Cream cheese.** Cream cheese is easy to make using cashews if you are so inclined. If not, purchase a cashew cream cheese at the market.
4. **Butter.** This one is tough. There are some good quality vegan “butters”, but they tend to be quite processed and are often based on coconut or palm oil. The most healthful option is a nut or seed butter. My favorite is cashew butter. It cannot be used for all applications, but it works well in many cookie recipes. Your finished product will

be a little denser. Other nut butters are reasonable options as well. In some baked goods such as muffins, cakes, and cupcakes, you can use prune puree, applesauce, or mashed bananas. Note that these add sugar rather than fat, so you will want to adjust other sweeteners. Prune puree adds a dark color – it's great with chocolate.

5. **Eggs.** Eggs tend to be used for binding, and there are many plant foods that work well for this. Here are some ideas for replacing an egg:
 - a. 1 tablespoon of ground flaxseeds plus 2 1/2 tablespoons water. Let sit a few minutes before using.
 - b. 1 tablespoon of chia seeds plus 3 tablespoons water. Let sit at least 15 minutes before using.
 - c. 3 tablespoons aquafaba (juice from canned chickpeas)
 - d. ¼ cup silken tofu
 - e. ¼ cup applesauce
 - f. ¼ cup mashed banana
 - g. 2 tablespoons starch (e.g., cornstarch or arrowroot starch) mixed with 3 tablespoons water
 - h. Commercial egg replacer (see package instructions for amount to equal one egg) – some products are made from mung beans and others are starch-based
6. **Sugar.** There are lots of reasons to minimize intake of white sugar. Fortunately, there are plenty of preferable replacements. Here are some good choices:
 - a. **Dried fruits.** Dates, and dried prunes are the healthiest sugar replacements because they are whole foods with fiber, macro- and micronutrients, and phytochemicals. While they don't work for everything, as they are dark in color. In addition, they are more moist than dry sugar, so that would have to be adjusted for in recipes. Dried fruits work beautifully in many cookies, squares, muffins, cakes, and loaves.
 - b. **Natural liquid sugars.** Maple syrup, blackstrap molasses, and honey (for those who include honey) are all more healthful options than more refined sugars.
 - c. **Date sugar.** If you need a granulated sugar, date sugar can work in some cases. It is made with dehydrated dates that are ground. It does not melt the way refined sugar does and is considerably more expensive than refined sugar.

- d. **Coconut sugar.** Made from the nectar of coconut tree blossoms, coconut sugar is a great replacement when you need something close to refined sugar. It is more nutritious than refined sugar as it retains more micronutrients.
 - e. **Blackstrap molasses.** Of all the “sugars” available, blackstrap molasses is the most nutrient-dense, as it is very high in calcium and iron. It has a very distinct flavor so has limited use. However, it is great in ginger cookies or balls (see recipe), and in muffins!
 - f. **Noncaloric natural sweeteners.** The safest noncaloric sweeteners are Monk Fruit extract and stevia. Monk fruit is a staple in traditional Chinese medicine. It contains mogrosides which are 200 times sweeter than sugar, so tiny amounts are needed, making it essentially calorie-free. Stevia is a leaf that contains no sugar. Its sweetness comes from steviolosides.
- 7. All-purpose flour.** You can replace all-purpose flour with whole grain or other whole food flours. **Here are some guidelines:**
- a. **Whole wheat flour** - use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup for every cup of all-purpose
 - b. **Oat flour** – use $1 \frac{1}{3}$ cups of oat flour to each cup of all-purpose flour. Note that not all recipes work with just oat flour – a mix is often best.
 - c. **Almond flour** – cannot be substituted for all-purpose flour 1:1. You might try $\frac{3}{4}$ cup almond flour plus a binder such as a starch or gum like guar gum or psyllium.
 - d. **Buckwheat flour** – use 1 cup for every cup of all-purpose flour. Not all recipes work when using as a complete replacement.
 - e. **Coconut flour** – cannot be substituted for all-purpose flour 1:1. You can use up to about 25% of the flour that is called for – the rest will need to be other flours. So, for example, if a recipe calls for 1 cup all purpose flour, you could use $\frac{1}{4}$ cup coconut flour, and the balance as whole wheat flour.
 - f. **Chickpea or bean flour** – use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup chickpea or bean flour for every cup of white flour. Generally, it is best not to replace more than half of your flour with bean flour.
 - g. **Brown Rice flour** – use $\frac{7}{8}$ cup for every cup of white flour
 - h. **Spelt, kamut, or rye flour** – use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup for every cup of white flour

8. **Gelatin.** Many people don't realize that gelatin is derived from collagen taken from animal body parts. The best replacement is agar powder or flakes. Pectin is also an option.

The holidays can be an especially challenging time as so many delicious treats abound. How can you manage without slipping up? First, just know that it is OK to slip up from time to time. It's part of what makes us human. Be kind to yourself and remember to focus on progress over perfection. Next, think about how you will make merry without regrets. Here are my top 5 tips:

1. **Keep your eye on the prize.** Remind yourself of why you went plant-based, how much it has improved your life, and why it is worth forging ahead.
2. **Bring food to share at holiday gatherings.** When you have healthy, delicious food at your disposal, you are less likely to fall off the wagon. Also, sharing beautiful, tasty treats can serve as an educational opportunity for those you share it with. It often opens people to conversations. If you are going to someone's home, be sure to let them know that you are plant-based and ask them if it is OK for you to bring something to share.
3. **Create delicious holiday food.** Spend time recreating favorite foods with whole food, plant-based ingredients, and add some new items to your holiday repertoire.
4. **Commit to a plan.** If you are heading into a situation that you know could derail you, make a plan and stick to it. Perhaps you need to decide ahead of time what you will or will not eat and drink. Think about eating before you go or bringing something with you. When you think ahead, you can better prevent decisions you will later regret.
5. **Make it easy.** Sometimes, it can take a lot of stress off to use a whole food plant-based meal delivery service or take out. It is also a very good way to support plant-based entrepreneurs.

I am happy to share some of my favorite holiday treats. First up are my ginger molasses energy balls. These are fun to make and delicious – if you are a fan of molasses. Second are “plant-based turtles”. I loved turtles when I was a child. When I started making vegan caramel, I couldn’t resist trying to recreate this special treat. The result is amazing. Third is a yummy maple-walnut cookie. You could replace the walnuts with pecans if you prefer. All three of these recipes are gluten-free (if you use gluten free oats for the cookies). I hope you enjoy them. Have a very happy holiday!



Ginger Molasses Energy Balls

Makes about 40-45 balls.

These protein-rich energy balls have just the right amount of spice – even though it seems like a lot. If you prefer, roll in hempseeds, coconut, or a mix of seeds.

1 ½ cups pecans

1 cup hazelnuts or almonds

1 cup dates, tightly packed (steam to soften, if hard)

1/4 cup nut butter (e.g., almond butter, peanut butter)
1/3 cup organic blackstrap molasses
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
3/4 teaspoon sea salt
3 tablespoons fresh, grated ginger (or 1 tablespoon ground ginger)
1 tablespoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon allspice
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon nutmeg
2/3 cup sesame seeds
1/2 cup hempseeds

1. In a food processor, process nuts into small pieces – do not overprocess – they should be finely chopped. Pour into a medium-sized bowl.
2. Process dates, nut butter, blackstrap molasses, vanilla extract, salt, ginger, cinnamon, allspice, cloves, and vanilla until smooth. Add hempseeds and ground nuts. Pulse until the nuts and seeds are distributed through the dough - do not over-process. With a spatula, put dough into a bowl. If it is sticky, place in the fridge for an hour or more for easier handling. Form into 1-inch balls. Roll in sesame seeds. Refrigerate or freeze.



Plant-based Turtles

Makes about 30 turtles

If you loved “turtles growing up, you will have fun with these. They are less sweet than the originals, but even more flavorful and far more nutritious!

Pecans (60 halves)

2 organic, fair trade dark chocolate bars (2 x 90 g/3 oz)

Caramel Filling

1 cup pine nuts or raw cashews (soaked for at least 2 hours and rinsed)

1 cup pitted, tightly packed Medjool dates (if using other dates, steam them to soften)

1 tsp vanilla

½ tsp sea salt (optional)

1. Place dates, pine nuts, vanilla, and salt into a food processor and process until very smooth. It should look like caramel. Freeze mixture for an hour or two to decrease stickiness and make the caramel easier to work with. Alternatively, refrigerate overnight or for several hours.
2. Line 2 cookie sheets with parchment paper or silicone mats. Place nuts on the cookie sheets, with 2 pecan halves, side by side, for each turtle.
3. Make a ball with about 2 teaspoons of the caramel. Place the ball on top of the pecans and press down so it forms a turtle-like round shape.
4. Freeze the nut/caramel mixture overnight or until completely solid.
5. Put the chocolate bars into the top of a double boiler over boiling water or in a small pot over low heat and heat and stir until the chocolate is entirely melted.
6. Take one pan of turtles out of the freezer.
7. Brush or spoon the chocolate over the top of each turtle – be sure to get the sides. Return cookie sheet to the freezer. Remove second tray and repeat.

8. Let the chocolate set completely before removing the turtles from the trays. Place in an airtight container and store them in the freezer. They taste best right from the freezer!

Variations:

1. For added flair, melt some white, or vegan milk chocolate and drizzle over the dark chocolate. The turtles picture below have been drizzled with oat milk chocolate.
2. Instead of using pine nuts or cashews, use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup nut butter – any type.
3. Instead of making turtles, place caramel right on the parchment paper or silicone mat. Press 3 hazelnuts one Brazil nut on top. Freeze. Once frozen, brush the underside with chocolate, let harden, flip over and drizzle chocolate on the top.



Maple Walnut Cookies

Makes 24 cookies

These cookies are not only a delicious treat, but they are a wonderful source of omega-3 fatty acids.

2½ cups walnuts

1/2 cup pure maple syrup

¼ cup nut butter (e.g., almond, hazelnut, mixed)



2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

½ teaspoon salt

¾ cup oat flour (or flour of your choice)

1/3 cup ground flaxseeds

1/3 cup dried cranberries, cherries, goji berries or coconut (optional)

24 pecan halves

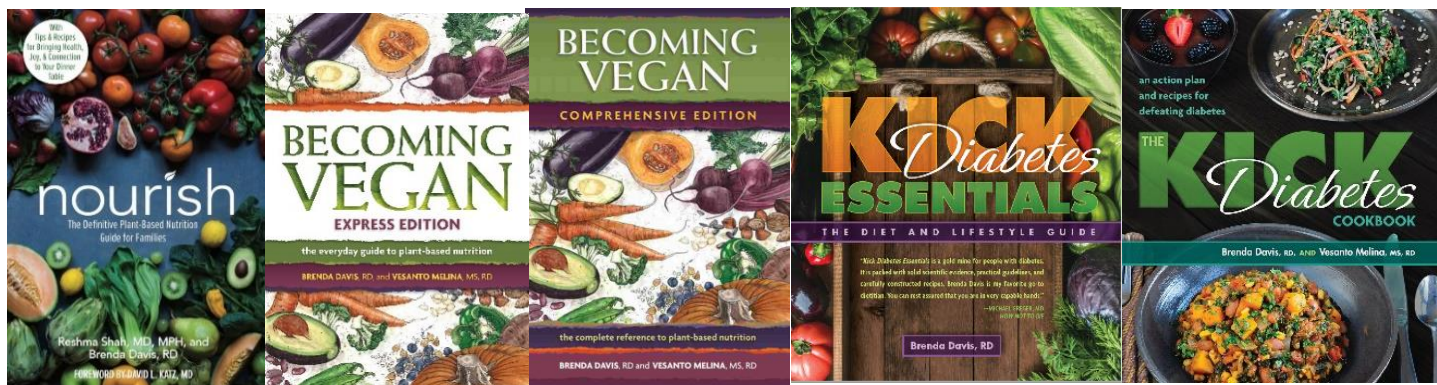
2-3 tablespoons maple syrup for brushing on pecan halves

1. Preheat oven to 350 F.
2. In a food processor, grind walnuts until they are finely chopped.
3. In a medium-sized bowl, stir together the maple syrup, nut butter, vanilla, and salt.
4. Add walnuts, oat flour, flaxseeds, and cranberries (if using). Stir to combine.
5. Spray 2 cookie sheets or line 2 cookie sheets with silicone mats.
6. Drop dough on cookie sheets with a spoon and flatten with a fork dipped in water.
7. Top with a pecan half. Brush with maple syrup.
8. Bake 15-20 minutes or until slightly golden on edges.



This article was written for a PCRM Food for Life Instructors group called So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. This group meets online to provide amazing cooking and nutrition demonstrations that are free to share globally. For wonderful whole food, plant-based cooking shows, tune in to their monthly broadcasts.

<https://somanycooks.com/about/>



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