

FALL in love with Monk Fruit

Nutrition Notes by Natalie

Fall is just a few weeks away and I am getting excited for my warm winter beverage collection. Have you ever searched for the perfect mate for your morning cup of Joe or something to give your ice tea a little splash of sweet without piling on loads of sugar? I may have the answer in a product called monk fruit.

Last week, my sister was in town for a visit and I was fixing her an afternoon cup of coffee. Then the question arose, what do you take in your drink? Knowing her like I do, I immediately assumed that she would want her usual “go to” creamer but I was wrong. She asked me if I had any monk fruit. To my embarrassment, being that I am a dietitian and should know chapter and verse about everything nutrition related (ha ha), I was not familiar with this product. Sure, I had heard the name but I really knew nothing about it. It was not heavily advertised like other natural and popular non calorie sweeteners. My sister shared with me that this guilt free fruit was actually very popular on her current diet and she loved it! In fact, it was better (in her opinion) than any other non-calorie sweetener she had ever tried. She had even experimented with it in some recipes and got our parents hooked as well. So, the immediate next step was to find out more about it. Won't you journey with me...

Monk fruit looks like a small gourd (pretty fitting for Fall wouldn't you say) and it grows on a vine. It is native to Southeast Asia, some parts of Thailand, and China. Fun fact, Buddhist monks in the 13th century were the first to cultivate the fruit, which is how the name came to be. Because fresh monk fruit spoils quickly it was originally used primarily in herbal medicines. Today, however, it is quickly gaining popularity as a popular sweetener. In fact, it is 150-200 times sweeter than sugar but with zero calories or carbohydrates! In addition the FDA considers monk fruit to be generally regarded as safe (GRAS) for consumption.

Only the purest forms of other non-caloric sweeteners earn this seal of approval.

Monk fruit sweeteners have been around for decades but only recently gained popularity because they became more readily available. It can be purchased in a variety of forms like granules, powders, and liquids. But wait there's more! Unlike other popular natural non calorie sweeteners, monk fruit is thought to have actual health benefits. The natural extract (mogrosides) are believed to have antioxidant properties which not only help fight disease but also are associated with reduction of diabetic complications.

Like a lot of other sweeteners in this category, monk fruit is reported to have a different taste than table sugar that some people find unpleasant or unusual with a slight aftertaste. What surprised me is that in actual product reviews, people reported the exact opposite, claiming it tasted more like sugar and with less reported side effects that other non-calorie sweeteners. The downside? It can be a bit pricier than other sweeteners due to the fact that it can be difficult to grow and costly to export. When purchasing a monk fruit product, beware of possible monk fruit mixtures. There are several products I saw online that had other added sugar blends like maltodextrin or dextrose. So, buyer beware and as a wise consumer read your labels closely, especially if you are diabetic so you don't purchase a mixture with regular sugar blends as well.

As I write this article I have yet to try this seemingly newfound secret sweetener that boasts an array of positive claims and very few negative features. However, being the skeptic that I am I will reserve judgement until I experience it for myself. Won't you join me, and let me know if you FALL in love with monk fruit.