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Sweetening the Deal

Four shaker-worthy alternatives to simple syrup.

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Sugar, in one of its many guises, is an indisputable element in a well-balanced cocktail. Too much can lead to a cloying, syrupy drink; while too little renders one that's harshly tart and just not very sipp-able. Ubiquitous simple syrup is the go-to ingredient on many a back bar, but it's far from the only option. Here are some alternatives, along with best uses and a few recipes to try.

Honey Syrup

Fitting in warm cocktails like the Hot Toddy, honey can be difficult to work with in cold drinks because it doesn't easily dissolve (which **Alice Gaber**, mixologist at Washington, DC's *Firefly*, points out is the reason bartenders made the switch years ago to simple syrup.) Still, it can be a great rich sweetener for cocktails that include ingredients ranging from rum, Bourbon and whiskey, to citrus and floral elements. Gaber uses a 1:1 ratio of honey to water, simmered until the honey dissolves. Other mixologists, like cocktail consultants **Scott Baird** and **Josh Harris** of *The Bon Vivants*, prefer to add just enough water to soften the honey ("Maximum flavor, minimum volume," they explain.)

Agave Nectar

Ideally, agave nectar should be sourced from Mexican agave plants and cooked until it's a thick and concentrated syrup. But recently unearthed questionable production methods make it debatable if some of the agave nectar on the market is any better than high fructose corn syrup. Still, proponents favor the neutral sweetness the real stuff gives to drinks like the margarita and its variations. And as **Amy Troutmiller**, assistant general manager at Washington, DC's *Urbana*, points out, since it's about one and half times sweeter than sugar, you can use less of it than sugar in cocktails.

Powdered Sugar

Powdered or confectioner's sugar readily dissolves in cold drinks like shaken cocktails and iced tea. That's why Troutmiller prefers it in some of her creations. "It blends easier [than granulated sugar] so there is no graininess in a cold drink." Try it in the classic collins, or in an old fashioned.

Marmalade

Though you may be more apt to reach for it for your morning toast than for use behind the bar, marmalade is an easy way to add not only sweetness but also attractive fruit flavors to cocktails. Baird and Harris tout it as an essential mixology 101 component, great for home bartenders looking to easily impress guests with multi-layered drinks. "Marmalade is more exciting than jellies or jams, with a great underlying bitter element," they note. Home cocktailians looking to shake up impressive cocktails would be wise to stock up on several jars—especially citrus flavors like Meyer lemon and blood orange. Just be sure to double strain to remove the pulp and make the resulting concoctions clear.

Recipes

Basic Marmalade Sour

Courtesy of Scott Baird and Josh Harris, Founding Partners of The Bon Vivants

2 oz. base spirit
1 oz. fresh lemon juice
1 heaping bar spoon, or scant 1 tablespoon, of marmalade (citrus flavors like orange and lemon work best)
¾ oz. egg white
Lemon peel, for garnish

Add first four ingredients to a cocktail shaker without ice, and shake vigorously. Add ice, and shake vigorously again. Double strain into a chilled cocktail glass, and garnish with a lemon peel.

Note: Baird and Harris also make a gin and elderflower variation of this sour by using 1.5 oz. of Plymouth gin, ½ oz. St. Germain, 1 oz. lemon juice and a heaping bar spoon of lemon marmalade.

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