# Miniature Masterpieces

Single-serving holiday desserts

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Whoever said you must resist tempting treats during this festive season probably never thought that bite-size cakes, pies, cookies and other delicious pastries, made with just a few ingredients, could satisfy our need to indulge in sweet treats.

Here's a no-brainer. The rich taste of a dense and delicious red velvet devil's food cake easily overwhelms a bland angel food cake that's made with low-calorie ingredients. But if you feel guilty about giving in to temptation, there are ways to make healthy desserts that satisfy our cravings for sweets without sacrificing taste. With just a spoonful of this and a smattering of that, it's easy to create desserts that don't leave you beset by regrets after you've indulged. But first, let's explore the science about the effect of sugar on our bodies.

## The Sugar High…and Low

There can be a definite downfall to eating too many sugary foods during the holidays. "The very second you consume sweets, you get a rush of dopamine, the 'feel-good' hormone, which has very addictive properties," says Washington, DC–based nutritionist Valerie Agyeman, RD. "As sugar enters your bloodstream, the pancreas releases insulin to control blood glucose levels. Glucose is rapidly digested, and your dopamine levels spike while blood sugar falls quickly, causing you to have a sugar 'crash.' This dip occurs after consuming a large quantity of carbohydrates and causes fatigue and possibly irritability, anxiety and other unpleasant symptoms."

In addition to tiredness, as well as weight gain, constantly loading up on too many sweets can overwork your pancreas and reduce its insulin production, says Carolyn Dean, MD, ND, a medical advisory board member of the Nutritional Magnesium Association. But excess insulin also creates problems, as cells may become resistant to the hormone, which boosts the risk of developing diabetes.

## Why We Crave Sweets

It's not surprising that we hunger for sugary foods such as pastries, pies and cakes. "Research suggests that sweets increase levels of the brain chemical serotonin, which helps regulate mood and appetite," says Agyeman. "Without carbohydrates, the brain stops regulating serotonin."

Findings show that carbohydrates improve mood, which is exactly why most people will choose a pastry over a carrot. So it could be said that human beings are somewhat addicted.

But there are ways to help lessen cravings. For example, eating healthy carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes may help to keep serotonin at optimum levels and reduce cravings sparked by less healthy carbohydrates, such as cookies, doughnuts and other sugary foods.

## Let Them Eat Healthy Cake

There is an easier way to control your intake and the type of treats you eat—make them yourself. Through trial and error, Arman Liew, author of Clean Sweets: Simple, High-Protein Desserts for One, learned how to lighten up the treats and desserts that acted like kryptonite on his diet.

Liew came up with the idea for his cookbook from the responses of readers from around the world to the original recipes and cooking experiences he shared on his popular blog, The Big Man's World.

"Initially, my website and its recipes would range from breakfasts to hearty dinners and classic cakes," Liew recalls. "Over time, I found the best responses were to healthy sweet snacks and desserts, especially ones with options for multiple dietary lifestyles."

Before creating his own recipes, Liew started out with little swaps—for example, a small chocolate bar to replace a jumbo-sized version—and he tried diet desserts. But there was always "something just off," he says. "They tasted artificial and nothing like their unhealthy counterparts."

Liew decided to make his own versions of traditionally unhealthy desserts. "With a lot of experimentation, I was able to re-create them without sacrificing on taste and without going crazy using multiple ingredients."

Peanut butter cheesecake mousseCourtesy of Arman Liew

## How to Make Clean Sweets

Simple ingredients are key. Many people purchase desserts from the grocery store or overindulge in sweets at parties because their favorite desserts are often difficult or too time-consuming to make. Liew wanted to include sweets that are not complicated and are quick, easy and tasty, without necessitating a hunt for hard-to-find and expensive specialty ingredients.

In Clean Sweets, Liew uses convenient ingredients like cocoa, nut butters, fruit and yogurt, and natural sweeteners like maple syrup, brown rice syrup and agave nectar.

Included in the book are several tasty single-serving breakfast, dessert, snack and frozen treat recipes—satisfying without the enticing leftovers. (He also shows you which ingredients you can and cannot swap out and the reasons why.)

The recipes in the book also include gluten-free, sugar-free, vegan and paleo options. For some of

these dishes, Liew uses nondairy milks, which is convenient, since many African Americans are lactose intolerant.

Ingredients Versus Calories

“You can substitute dairy milk with nondairy milk alternatives, such as soy, rice, coconut or other nut milks,” adds Agyeman. “Buttermilk is found in a lot of dessert recipes, and someone who is lactose intolerant can substitute it with plain soy yogurt or soy milk. For light cream, which is also used in many dessert recipes, you can substitute whole coconut milk or even dairy-free soy coffee cream.”

Then there are dessert recipes that call for butter, which can be high in cholesterol and saturated fat.

“A healthier alternative would be to use avocado puree,” Agyeman says. “Not only do avocados provide many nutrients to help maintain heart health, they also help to stabilize blood sugars for those with diabetes.”

Avocados have a similar consistency and texture to butter, making them great for baked goods such as brownies, muffins and even cakes.

For the recipes in Clean Sweets, Liew focused more on ingredients versus calories. “Calories can easily be manipulated, but often that comes with a compromise,” he says. “Usually you’d see artificial sweeteners or unpronounceable ingredients included to keep calories low.”

Tips to Slow Sugar Absorption and Control Portions

When single-sized desserts won’t work, “try to fill up on good fats such as [those found in] wild-caught salmon, coconut oil, olive oil and healthy nuts, such as pecans, cashews and almonds, to feel satiated and less likely to overeat,” Dean advises. “This will help you stick to small portions because you will feel fuller and it will slow sugar absorption.”

Adds Agyeman, “It can be very tempting to eat too many desserts at holiday dinners and parties, but luckily there are ways to discipline yourself so that you don’t make the wrong decision.” The following three portion- control tips can help:

First, eat with your stomach, not your eyes. Listen to your tummy. Enjoy each bite, put your fork down while chewing and take a drink between each bite. This gives your body enough time to alert the brain that your hunger is satisfied.

Second, remember: everything in moderation. Go easy with the scooper. Ask for a small plate and think twice before you load up on everything. It’s better to go light at first and listen to your body. If you’re still hungry, drinking water may just do the trick. If you know you’ll be eating dessert, maybe skip the appetizer.

Third, think ahead. Eat before you go to a holiday dinner or party. Don’t deprive yourself of food

because you'll just set yourself up for a disaster. Nosh throughout the day, eat light and exercise if you can. That way, you won't have the urge to eat everything you see at the table.

Another way to keep dessert portions small and make sure a sweet treat is better for you is to bring your own yummy homemade tidbits to parties or dinners. This is infinitely healthier for you and the other guests too.

Desserts for One

Scrumptious single-serving sweets that satisfy

Peanut Butter Cheesecake Mousse

Ingredients

½ cup plain nonfat yogurt (dairy-free, if necessary)

2 tablespoons peanut butter

1 tablespoon honey or maple syrup or granulated sweetener of choice

In a mixing bowl, combine all the ingredients and mix until fully combined.

Transfer the mixture to a serving bowl, top with extra peanuts/peanut butter and enjoy!

- For a lower-fat option, swap out the peanut butter for peanut flour. It will be much thicker.
- For a thicker mousse, refrigerate overnight.
- You can use a sugar-free syrup, but it will no longer be thick. I'd recommend opting for a tablespoon of your favorite granulated sweetener.
- Use cultured coconut yogurt, swap the peanut butter for drippy almond butter and enjoy!

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