

Granola, muesli's sinful sister?

by Sabine Eiche

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When I say granola and muesli, what pops into your mind? Probably that they're two of the countless modern breakfast foods available in every grocery store across North America. Will it surprise you to know that granola and muesli were invented over a century ago, in sanatoria in the United States and Switzerland respectively?

Often considered related, originally granola and muesli had very different characters, still intimated by the pronunciation of their names. Say the Swiss word muesli – your mouth purses and you look very prim, an appropriate expression to link to a food associated with healthful living. Eat it and you feel disciplined and virtuous. Now pronounce the American granola – instead of prim, you look elated, raring to taste the first spoonful of something that nowadays isn't invariably healthful.

But wait a minute – the granola and muesli that you buy today would be unrecognizable to someone from a hundred years ago.

Let's quickly review their history. Both names, granola and muesli, are descriptive, the first referring to its ingredients – grain – the second to its quality – “muesli,” which is Swiss German for puree or mash. Granola, invented in 1887 by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg of the Battle Creek Sanatorium in Michigan, originally consisted of ground-up biscuits of oats, wheat and corn meal. Muesli's creator is the Swiss Dr. Maximilian Bircher-Benner, who around 1900 prescribed a balanced diet of raw fruits and vegetables for the patients at his sanatorium in

Zurich. He developed a mix consisting primarily of grated apple, citrus juice, oats, cream and nuts, which patients would eat before a main meal.

Freshly-made muesli following Dr. Bircher's recipe can still be found in Switzerland and parts of Germany. I've had it for breakfast when staying at hotels in the southwest German region Baden-Württemberg, and I'd return to those hotels for the muesli alone.

You can recreate it in your own kitchen. For a single portion of Bircher muesli soak 1 tablespoon rolled oats in 2-3 tablespoons lemon or orange juice until soft, then mix with 1 grated apple, a tablespoon of cream, and top with chopped hazelnuts or walnuts.

Not only muesli but also granola has suffered reprehensible transformation by the North American food industry. They've laced it with various unwholesome ingredients, turning it into more of a sugary snack than a healthy meal. Thank goodness it's so easy to make your own granola and decide exactly what goes into it.

In July 2009 the New York Times published an intriguing recipe for granola with olive oil, which I've altered slightly. My version – in large bowl mix 3 cups rolled oats, 1 ½ cups sunflower seeds, 1 cup pumpkin seeds, 1 cup unsweetened shredded coconut, ¾ cup maple syrup, ½ cup extra virgin olive oil, 1 teaspoon kosher salt, ½ teaspoon cinnamon; bake on rimmed cookie sheet at 300 degrees for 45 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes. More recently I've made a savoury version, simply eliminating the maple syrup, cinnamon and coconut.

Although I sing the praises of Bircher muesli, I can't deny that there's something devilishly delicious about granola – in my healthful adaptations, naturally.