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Molasses' complex flavor brings new dimension to savories as well as sweets

By Monica Kass Rogers | Special to the Tribune
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Honey's yummy, but molasses' rich, bittersweet essence has a darker, more potent allure. Although a far cry from molasses staples of baked beans and brown bread, today's molasses-rich recipes rely on the same flavor- and moisture-enhancing qualities that have made the ingredient a mainstay for generations. Molasses puts the chew in cookies, the soul in shoofly pie, the fudgy moistness in gingerbread. Molasses (and its kindred sweeteners such as sorghum syrup and pomegranate molasses) now is used in savory recipes: sauces and braises for meats, marinades for vegetable salads, cures for fish and glazes for poultry.

Pomegranate molasses, however, should never be used as a direct substitute for "true" molasses. Made in Middle Eastern countries from various combinations of reduced pomegranate juice, sugar-beet molasses, sugar, lime juice and sometimes wood ash, the very tart and tarrish reduction is much more potently flavored than cane molasses and must be thinned with another liquid before use.

Rather than use store-bought pomegranate molasses, chef Hoss Zaré of Zaré at Flytrap restaurant in San Francisco suggested that ambitious home cooks follow his lead and make their own. "You will find that the smell of pomegranate juice cooking down is absolutely intoxicating!" promised Zaré. Zaré uses the syrup to glaze oven-baked veal meatballs, scented with tarragon and topped with pistachios. He likes the dish so much that it was part of the Persian New Year menu he served last week at the James Beard House in New York. Zaré also makes a grape molasses, reducing freshly squeezed grape juice with sugar and mint.