

Sweet and Raw

Local Honey Producers Keep It Real

BY RHEA MAZE

A swarm of people hover around Kris Holthaus's table of infused raw honey at the Fort Collins farmers' market, trying to decide between lavender, lemon, cinnamon, orange blossom, peach, blackberry, raspberry, chocolate hazelnut and amaretto flavors. Each jar of the nutritious nectar shimmers a different shade of gold and entices those who pass by with an irresistibly sweet glow.

"I try to make honey that I would enjoy eating," says Holthaus, owner of Red Dog Expressions and Lavender Farm. Holthaus produces chemical-free raw honey from about 50 hives on a lavender farm in northern Fort Collins. "I used to be a honey snob who questioned why anyone would want to flavor perfectly good honey ... but it's just completely different."

Each year, she reserves the sweetest, lightest and mildest batches of the honey harvest for her famed infusion process: adding spice or dissolving food-grade essential oils into whipped honey.

Like the positive nutrition news about chocolate, honey naturally contains properties that are good for you. Raw honey is different from commercial honey in that it has not undergone heating, pasteurization or processing, therefore retaining beneficial vitamins, minerals, amino acids, enzymes and antioxidants. Known to have antiseptic and antibiotic properties, raw honey can help heal cuts and burns and is also used to alleviate allergies, indigestion and more. With a full-bodied flavor that puts processed honey to shame, one can immediately taste the raw difference.



"Honey ended up sort of like jug wine," says Colorado State Beekeepers Association President Beth Conrey, who also owns Bee Squared Apiaries. "But once people began touting the benefits of the ways in which they managed their grapes, consumers started appreciating the differences in wine. You certainly can't compare a Chardonnay to a Cabernet Sauvignon and the same is true with honey."

The color and flavor of honey depends on the flowers visited by the bees. Laura Tyler and her husband, Andy Schwarz, who co-own Backyard Bees in Boulder and place their hives on mostly organic farms, love

extraction day when they get to taste and rename each variety of honey based on its particular location.

"Every year we look for the right words to match what the honey tastes like," Tyler says. "Our honey tends to be very light in flavor—sometimes it can be a little spicy or tea-like; sometimes there are hints of cinnamon. One of our most popular varieties came from north Boulder fields and had a green, grassy flavor."

And she swears by honey facials. "Once you see what raw honey can do for your skin, it makes you a believer. Do a honey facial for a couple days in a row ... it evens out your skin tone and can help reverse sun damage—it's really quite remarkable."

While a love of good honey inspires many folks to get started in beekeeping, they often end up falling even harder for the bees. "Bees are eusocial, which means they are part of complex social structures. Opening up the colony reveals this fascinating world of behavior patterns. It's kind of like looking into a hyper-organized



Brent Edelen of
Grampa's Gourmet Honey.
Photo by Matt Nager.

dollhouse. Beekeeping is something you can do for years and still learn something new all the time,” Tyler says.

Not only do the hard-working bees pollinate much of our food supply and provide us with sweet liquid gold, they also task their keepers with paying close attention to nature’s nuances and to patterns occurring in the environment. Grampa’s Gourmet Honey in Alamosa, run by sixth-generation beekeeper Brent Edelen and his business partner Scott Reynolds, are known for producing single-source varieties. Their bees forage in the wide open spaces of Colorado’s San Luis Valley and the deserts of New Mexico to make huajillo honey from the acacia family; southwest oak honey from gambel oaks in the Rocky Mountain foothills, and other distinct varieties such as tamarisk, star thistle, desert wildflower, chamiso and Colorado clover honeys. By moving the hives around and placing them on certain blooms, they are able to harvest unique-tasting honeys from select nectar sources.

“Beekeeping mirrors nature,” Edelen says. “The bees are an indicator of what’s going on from season to season. When the plants are struggling, the bees show it; when the bees are struggling, the plants show it. Drought is a challenge, too, as when plants don’t produce a lot of nectar, bees don’t produce a lot of honey.”

Beekeepers experience hive loss for a variety of reasons. “Beekeeping is a troublesome profession. With parasites, mites, pesticides and diseases—many times a hive will die and we don’t know why,” says Northern Colorado Beekeepers Association President Greg Bowdish, who keeps bees and makes honey wine for his Hunters Moon Meadery. Some beekeepers use select chemicals on their hives to kill mites; those who completely eschew chemicals, keeping their honey as pure as possible, may tend to lose more hives. Predicting hive survival and honey production is about as tough as predicting the weather. What is known is that bees need a healthy environment and lots of forage.

“The main challenges we face are finding good, clean places for the bees where they won’t come into too much contact with GMOs and

pesticides,” Reynolds says. A bee’s foraging radius is around three square miles, which makes it essentially impossible to ensure that they aren’t drifting into areas with pesticides or other harmful chemicals.

“Truly organic honey would have to come from a county where they don’t apply pesticides,” says Bowdish. “The best we can do is produce chemical-free honey and place hives in the cleanest possible foraging areas.”

One can also lend bees a hand by providing them with a good habitat in yards and gardens. Chemically treated landscapes devoid of flowers are a dangerous and barren desert wasteland for pollinators. “Support local beekeepers and support bees with your gardening and lawn-care regimen,” says Conrey. “Remember that there are these little tiny things out there that depend on it.”

“And know where your honey comes from,” advises Edelen. “Honey is kind of funny—it never spoils and is a thieves’ trade in some ways because it can be packed under any label. Therein lies a lot of confusion. You have to educate yourself about honey.”

Holthaus remains committed to producing chemical-free honey and to working on raising queens that can adapt to various pests. Though not always easy, her hard work has paid off. “My honey is pure, raw honey,” she says. “With no heat, no pasteurization, no filtering and no chemicals added—it’s as good as it can be.”

Visit the Colorado State Beekeepers Association website (ColoradoBeekeepers.org) for a directory of honey producers near you and more information about bees and honey, including programs and seed company resources for forage planting, integrated pest management strategies, a database of chemicals that impact bees, local educational offerings for new beekeepers, recipes and more.

Writer Rhea Maze has a sweet tooth and is thinking of putting a few beehives in her backyard. Find more of her writing at RheaMaze.com.

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