

THE BUZZ ON LOCAL BEES

DEBORAH SCHUMACHER, Staff Writer

Originally printed in *The Co-op Commons* (June/July 2008)

*At the moment when you eat honey, it creates the proper connection and relationship between the airy and fluid elements in the human being. There is nothing better for a human being than to add a little honey in the right quantity to food . . . it makes human beings strong.**

Did you know that bees were the first domesticated animal? Before sheep and goats, before chickens, human beings collaborated with bees to make food, a very healthy food it turns out. Honey can be used to treat wounds (it has anti-bacterial, anti-viral and anti-fungal properties). Mix honey and lemon for a sore throat. Use it with olive oil for a hair treatment. Or just eat a big spoonful of it for the complex flavors condensed from the pollen and nectar of flowers.

Most honey sold in grocery stores comes from the commercial production of honey, large-scale operations that often rely on chemicals to medicate bees and keep their hives pest-free and that replace the honey bees produce to feed themselves with high fructose corn syrup (likely from genetically modified corn) that doesn't provide nearly the nutritional support bees need. Large-scale commercial honey production is more than anything a honey extraction operation that treats bees a lot like cows and chickens in CAFOs (confinement animal feedlot operations).

To get real honey and all its healthful benefits you might try sampling some of the local honey we sell in our store. This honey comes from small-scale beekeepers who engage in a true collaboration with this complex creature we call the honeybee. At any given time you can find on our shelves **Golden Harvest/Bee Ranch** honey from Whidbey Island, **Olympic Ridge Apiary** honey from Port Ludlow, and **Tavener** honey from Port Townsend.

Gentleman's Avocation No More

Dave Myhre of Olympic Ridge Apiary says that beekeeping is no longer a "gentleman's avocation." Since he started keeping bees in the early 80s, beekeeping has become "ultra complicated," with beekeepers struggling to keep up with the latest diseases and fending off chemical companies wanting to sell them their latest remedies. If it isn't varroa or tracheal mites, it's the new nosema fungus attacking the gut of the bee, or the Israeli Acute Paralysis Virus (IAPV) that some researchers thought might be responsible for Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD).

Les Tavener of Tavener's in Port Townsend has a different take on CCD. He believes that similar phenomena have happened before in history. He noted the "disappearing bees" beekeepers experienced in the 1880s. He's also not so sure about recent research suggesting that IAPV is responsible for CCD because, even though a connection was made between the virus and Australian honeybees shipped to the U.S. to help with California fruit tree pollination, "further research," he says, "finds this virus was in the U.S. years before the arrival of Australian bees."

Coming Back and Easing Out

After experiencing his own “disappearing bees” this winter, Dave Myhre has been working hard to restore his bee colonies. When he gave a final check to the hives last November, “every hive was packed and all were healthy.” When he checked the second week in February, the hive was empty. Coming back from that devastating loss, Myhre has since received a new package of bees and the new queen has started laying eggs (she’ll lay up to 500-1000 eggs a day for two to three years).

“It’s the most humbling experience in the world,” Myhre says of his experience tending his bees. “Just when you think you’ve figured it out, they throw you a curve ball and you have to go read more books.”

While Myhre and other beekeepers in our area were discovering devastating losses of bees this winter, Les Tavenner was relatively unaffected. Two years ago he lost much of his colony to mites and has since been downsizing his operation to 12 hives from a peak of 50. Where he used to collect one and a half tons of honey a year, with recent losses, these days he collects around 500 pounds. He’s retired now, but still keeps bees and tries to produce enough to keep the Co-op supplied. His focus these days is on mentoring young beekeepers so he can pass this knowledge on to the next generation.

Healthy Practices for Bees and Honey Lovers

Unlike large commercial operations, our area beekeepers keep it small and tend their bees with care. One thing they don’t do is feed their colonies high fructose corn syrup. Les Tavenner says he’ll feed sugar syrup when needed, say if he’s hived a late swarm, finds he has a weak colony, or when, because of bad weather, the bees don’t have an adequate store of honey. Dave Myhre warns that corn syrup is “really bad; the next best is cane sugar to make sugar syrup.” He explains sugar syrup “is okay, but it’s not a whole food; when bees forage for pollen and nectar, they bring back every vitamin and mineral they need.” Myhre’s practice is to extract honey the first and second weeks of July; everything the bees collect from July to the end of September, “all that nectar and pollen, that’s theirs.”

For honey to be truly healthy it shouldn’t be heated. Tavenner’s honey comes straight from the hive and doesn’t get heated over 120 degrees. Low heat, he explains, doesn’t damage honey at all. “Remember,” he said, “colonies out in the sun get quite warm!” Myhre doesn’t heat honey either. “If it crystallizes,” he says, “you can heat the container in warm water in a pan on the stove.” Heating honey over 130 degrees changes the honey so that “it’s not really honey anymore.” Just a note: honey usually needs to be heated a bit so that it can be poured into containers.

Follow the Nectar

Bees are primarily pollen (protein) and nectar (sugar) collectors. “They make a paste and feed the paste to young bees,” Dave Myhre explained, “returning to the hive with grey, yellow, purple pollen in their ‘pollen pockets;’ you can tell where they’ve been just looking at what they’ve got in their pockets.”

If you’re lucky you can discern some lingering flavor of the flowers that the bees have supped on. Starting in late winter to the end of August things are blooming: witch hazel in February;

alder catkins, pussy willows, and maple trees blooming in April; and as the season unfolds, Oregon grape, red huckleberry, wild blueberry, blackberries, fireweed, Canadian thistle.

A “Graying” Industry

Les Tavenner calls beekeeping a “graying” industry where the average age of beekeepers (like many of our farmers) is around 50 years old. He points out that in this country we used to have 5 million colonies of bees; now there are 2.5 million colonies. The human population has doubled, he notes ironically, while the number of beekeepers has halved.

Beekeeping is a tender business requiring an aptitude for details and a fidelity to creatures small and complex. Rudolf Steiner suggested that because bees delve into the sexy parts of flowers they “bring love life from the flowers into the beehive” and concludes “you need to study the life of bees from the standpoint of the soul.” The beekeepers I talked to seemed to agree each in their own way. Dave Myhre cautions “you can’t train a bee like you can train a dog. They say they’re domesticated, but all we can do is learn from them.”

Tom Schioler of Golden Harvest/The Bee Ranch was too busy moving bees in late April when asked to interview for this article! But we want our readers to know that he’s helped to fill a gap in our honey supply through the spring with bulk honey when the usual Rainbow honey ran out for several weeks. He also has an interesting mix of honey that he sells at The Food Co-op and the Farmer’s Market including creamed honey, blackberry and fireweed honeys, vanilla honey, and unprocessed bee pollen. Golden Harvest is located on Whidbey Island.

*From *Bees*, a series of lectures about bees presented by Rudolf Steiner in Dornach, Germany in 1923.