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Sticky Situation

Chefs, locavores, and gourmets across the country are buzzing about U.S. varietal honeys. BY ROWAN JACOBSEN

“I’VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHY AMERICANS DON’T TAKE THEIR HONEYS seriously,” Marina Marchese said one morning as we sat in her Connecticut garden, watching squadrons of bees launch themselves from her hives and buzz off in search of nectar. “In Europe, they talk about it like it’s gold. We have such amazing local honeys, but you don’t see them in stores.”



Gold standard:
Wildflower honeycomb.

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GLOBAL GOURMET



That's changing fast, and Marchese is one reason why. After visiting shops in Italy that proudly displayed chestnut and lavender honeys beside local wines and olive oils, she started Red Bee Honey, which works with a handful of American apiaries (bee colonies) to bring distinctive honeys to a discerning audience. Red Bee's stylish glass bottles adorn the shelves of such upscale boutiques as Mario Batali's Tarry Market and Murray's Cheese Shop in Manhattan and Connecticut's Winvian resort and spa – a far cry from those plastic bears at the local farm stand.

Honey is one of nature's little miracles: A

Match game: Pair the honeys with their hue – acacia, buckwheat, goldenrod, tupelo, wildflower (see below for answers).

single pound represents the combined efforts of about 2 million flower blossoms, a colony of 40,000 honeybees, and one overworked beekeeper. The bees gather a drop of nectar from each blossom, bring it back to their hive, and evaporate it with their wings until it condenses into a sugary, shelf-stable syrup. Plants offer this nectar purely to induce bees to visit, and as a bee wallows in the flower, lapping up the nectar, it inadvertently covers its furry

1. Acacia 2. Wildflower 3. Buckwheat 4. Tupelo 5. Goldenrod

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Naughty and nice: Bee Naughty beekeepers and (right) NYC chef Peter Hoffman.



little body in pollen, which is transferred to the next flower, fertilizing it to fruit. The process is essential to both our wildlands and our agriculture: About a third of our foods – everything from almonds to avocados – wouldn't exist without it.

Since every type of flower has a particular flavor of nectar, individual honeys can taste amazingly different. Normally, bees gather nectar from whatever blossoms they can find within three miles of their hive to produce “wildflower” honey that's a blend of many nectars. Like a blended Scotch, it's typically tasty and balanced, but with less unique character. Farms and orchards, however, sometimes limit bees to a single type of flower (or the bounty of one flowering plant becomes so overwhelming they don't bother looking farther afield). When this happens, they make varietal honeys – the single-malts of the apian world. From the clove-and-nutmeg kick of a Florida swamp's tupelo honey to the buttered velvet of wild blueberry honey from the barrens of Maine, each jar captures the botanical essence of

a single place and time, making honey the new rock star in the world of sustainable and local foods.

Recently at Savoy in New York's SoHo neighborhood, chef Peter Hoffman (a beekeeper himself) served a “honey flight” for one course: three honeys, from three different flowers, paired with three varieties of apples and cheeses. In Midtown, Julian Niccolini, co-owner of power-lunch spot The Four Seasons (no relation to the hotel chain), serves his own Bee Naughty honey culled from eight hives he keeps near his Westchester County home.

On the other side of the country, executive chef Gavin Stephenson of Seattle's Fairmont Olympic Hotel decided to improve the health of his customers and support America's honeybees in one shot. “I'm on a quest to eliminate high-fructose corn syrup from our restaurants,” he told me. “We serve around 400,000 diners a year at the hotel. If we as chefs can't do something to make a difference, we can't expect anyone else to.”



Roof service: This fall, hives atop Seattle's Fairmont Olympic Hotel will provide honey for glazed salmon, muffins, and more.

Stephenson tapped beekeeper Corky Luster, who keeps hives throughout the Seattle area, to supply honey that now turns up in everything from the Fairmont's muffins to the glaze on its signature smoked salmon. "As I began tasting Corky's honeys, I started noticing the different flavors. He had me taste one from beehives in Snoqualmie that tasted just like lemon drops. Corky still doesn't know what flower is responsible for that flavor."

When Luster suggested he try keeping hives on the Fairmont's roof, Stephenson jumped at the chance. "It's really become a part of our hotel. The whole staff got into it. They're the ones who painted the hives. And they're our best marketers; as soon as they tell customers that the honey comes from the roof, people get really excited." A small pool on the roof serves as the bees' water source. Stephenson floats wine corks on it as landing platforms, so the bees can get a drink without drowning. "It's pretty funny to go up there and see them bobbing around on Château d'Yquem corks."

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