

The Outside Story



The Buzz on Honey Flavors

By: Joe Rankin

It's still the middle of winter, but the sun is climbing higher each day and I know that it won't be long until my honey bees are out seeking nectar and pollen.

From early-blooming red maple trees. Then sugar maples, apple trees, dandelions. From blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries. From clover, staghorn sumac, and basswood trees. From milkweed in the abandoned field. From the coneflowers, thyme, and sage in our perennial garden. From asters and goldenrod; jewelweed and Japanese knotweed. For a bee, the warmer seasons are a Mardi Gras parade of nectars.

The European honey bee has been in North America almost as long as the Europeans who brought it. It is a miracle of nature, pollinating plants with abandon, while turning their nectars into one of nature's most delicious substances. In a good year a hive can produce 60 pounds or more of surplus honey. But mileage may vary, as they say. Much about production, and flavor, depends on weather and location.

We call the multi-floral honey from our 30 or so hives "wildflower honey." So-called varietal, or monofloral, honeys come (mostly) from a single flower source. There are some 300 types of honey produced in the United States, according to the National Honey Board. Most varietal honeys are produced by commercial beekeepers who move their hives from place to place to pollinate crops, or simply to take advantage of a "honey flow" from a particular plant.

Tupelo honey is one example. So is basswood honey. (I once made a stupendous mead from basswood honey produced in the southern Appalachians.) Florida is famous for orange blossom honey. Maine for blueberry honey. There's light clover honey, and dark, strong buckwheat honey.

Although monofloral honey may have less variation than my wildflower honey, each batch is still unique, because plants change across the landscape, and weather – temperature, rainfall, timing of rains – is always different.

Honey is 95 percent carbohydrates, mostly sugars. Fructose and glucose are the most common. The *Hive and the Honey Bee*, the beekeeper's bible, notes that recent research has "revealed honey to be a highly complex mix of sugars" major and minor. "Many of those sugars are not found in nature, but are formed during ripening and storage by bee enzymes and the acids of honey," Isomaltose, anyone? What about a little laminaribiose?

Honey flavors also vary because of the volatiles that flowers use as attractants, said Kim Flottum, the editor of Bee Culture magazine and the co-author of *The Honey Connoisseur: Selecting, Tasting and Pairing Honey, with a Guide to More Than 30 Varietals*. This is why honey often tastes and smells like the plants the nectar came from. It's also why it pays to treat honey gently, said Flottum. Overheating can drive off the volatiles and leave honey tasting sweet, but lacking in personality.

Flottum emphasized that the influences on honey flavor are complex, and extend well beyond sugars and volatiles, including the water the nectar plant "drinks," the nutrients it absorbs, the acidity of the soil that it grows in, and the chemicals it produces to protect itself. "The final ingredients are almost infinite," he said.

Marina Marchese is the founder of the American Honey Tasting Society, co-author of *The Honey Connoisseur* and a beekeeper on a mission to educate Americans about the pleasures of American honey. She referred to the French term *terroir*, meaning, the taste an environment gives to a food.

"For example, orange trees grow in Florida, but if you go to southern California or Arizona they have different orange trees and the orange honey has a different flavor and odor," Marchese said. "An orange honey from the Mediterranean tastes different as well."

Charles Mraz of Champlain Valley Apiaries (motto: "The flower's fragrance is its flavor"), is a third generation bee keeper. His company produces tens of thousands of pounds a year from 700 or so hives. He calls his honey clover honey because much of it is based on clovers. But a lot of other plants are in there as well.

Working his bees during the summer Mraz can often tell, by taste or smell, what plants

they've been visiting. "I can certainly distinguish a clover flow, a locust flow and a goldenrod flow," he said. "The bigger ones are quite distinguishable. We get Japanese knotweed sometimes. We've also gotten purple loosestrife. It has a green tint to it."

While marketers of varietal honeys may tout their single source provenance, Mraz says Vermont's multifloral honeys are truly "magical."

"I think the honey we get here in the Champlain Valley of Vermont has a really remarkable flavor and a complex range of flavors," he said. "A lot of really high quality honeys are kind of monolithic. I think a lot of what makes our Vermont honeys so complex is the variety of our honey sources."

Joe Rankin lives, writes and keeps bees in Maine. *The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine: northernwoodlands.org, and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: wellborn@nhcf.org*

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