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SECOND HELPING

A Georgia beekeeper gets stuck on honeybees, turning his childhood hobby into liquid gold.

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"I NEVER INTENDED TO DO THIS FOR A LIVING," LAUGHS TED DENNARD, THRUSTING A BARE HAND INTO A SWARMING HIVE. But the 39-year-old has been smitten with bees his entire life: apprenticing as a boy with an old apiarist who kept hives near his childhood home, teaching beekeeping in Jamaica as a volunteer with the Peace Corps, and even harvesting honey in his downtown Savannah apartment. Bees came and went through an open window, much to his neighbors' chagrin. Eventually, the former schoolteacher realized that most people weren't privy to the charms of raw, unfiltered honey, and the only way to get the good stuff—so good you eat it straight from the comb—is to collect it yourself. So he founded the Savannah Bee Company to seek the finest varieties Georgia bees were willing to share.

Ted Dennard pulls a frame from hives in Oatland Island, a nature preserve outside of Savannah. The frame gives the bees a structure in which they build honeycomb.



LEFT TO RIGHT Before Ted handles hives, he calms the bees with pine straw and Spanish moss smoke blown in with this old smoker. Each hive holds multiple honeycombs, within which nectar transforms into honey. The combs add sweet texture to a plate with fresh figs and cheese. Ted harvests the honeycomb with his bare hands. "I'd rather take a couple of stings," he says, preferring his dexterity to the safety of gloves.

Ted's home state is honeybee heaven, thanks to its short winters and abundance of blossoms. In lowland river basins (some would call them swamps), he harvests honey made from the nectar of tupelo, a flowering gum tree indigenous to the area. "When tupelo is blossoming, that's all bees will go to," he says, illustrating a trait unique to honeybees called "flower fidelity." Collecting nectar from one type of plant produces monofloral honeys prized for their pure flavor.

There are more than 3,000 types of monofloral honeys, ranging from pale and mildly flavored to dark brown and complex. As for the straw-colored, nuanced tupelo, "It almost tastes like butter-cookie dough," Ted says.

Outside April's two-week window when tupelo trees bloom, Ted chases other blossoms, transporting his bee colonies to collect nectar from gallberry and palmetto along the coast, and sourwood in the mountains. "This year, orange blossom honey was the best since 1967," he boasts of the citrus varietal. Like wine, monofloral honey is subject to seasonal whim—too much rain or wind means less foraging and diluted flavor.

To keep up with demand, Ted has multiplied his hives, going from 50 five years ago to 4,000 today. He manages with the help of small-batch beekeepers across the state. "Keeping bees is such a relaxing activity," he says, noting the hum of thousands of bees feverishly flapping their wings.

"When the hives are full, you go days without sleeping," Ted says. During peak harvest season—spring through early summer—he visits the hives morning, noon, and night. The rest of the year he is less frenetic, making beeswax products in his workshop and scouting new havens for hives.

Most of Ted's honeys are packaged in hexagonal jars—a nod to the shape of the honeycomb, which bees build to store the honey. Some of the honey is sold in long, elegantly tapered bottles, which customers appreciate for their form and function: they look lovely and make retrieving that last drop a pleasure. Regardless of packaging, everyone has a honey preference: raw, in its liquid state; creamed or whipped, to spread like butter; or flecked with pieces of honeycomb for added texture. "To make a pound of honey, bees have to visit two million flowers, so you don't want to be wasteful," says Ted, who uses honeycomb for beeswax candles (which burn brighter and longer than paraffin).

Honeycomb is not only useful but also edible and highly nutritious. Recently, it's become a darling of chefs in the States and abroad. "We heard about it through Italian beekeepers," he says of serving crumbled, honey-filled hexagons with piquant cheeses, such as Saga blue and Cheddar. For recipes using honey from one of Ted's favorite neighborhood restaurants, Georges' of Tybee, see "The Dish" on page 149. To order Ted's honey, go to www.savannahbee.com.



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For the names of winners, available after 8/2/05, send a separate, stamped, self-addressed (#10) envelope to: "Find True Flavor" Winners, P.O. Box 5195, Blair, NE 68009-5195, to be received by 7/29/05. Sponsor: Kraft Foods Global, Inc., Northfield, IL 60093.



SECOND HELPING



ABOVE Ted won't waste a single drop of honey. To remove the sticky coating from the inside of a jar, he pours in a few spoonfuls of warm water, caps and shakes the jar, then pours the sweetened liquid over ice with lime, mint, and seltzer.

{BITS O' HONEY}

Kitchen tips for using, cooking, and baking with this natural nectar.

Keep honey at room temperature in an airtight container. Crystallization is the natural process where liquid honey becomes solid. To decrystallize, place the jar in warm water, or place honey in a microwave-safe container and microwave (lid off), stirring every 30 seconds, until crystals dissolve. **A 12-ounce jar of honey equals one cup.** When working with honey, a coating of vegetable oil or nonstick cooking spray in your measuring cup or spoon will prevent sticking.

When cooking with honey, pair the partnering ingredients' flavors with the type of honey. Mild honeys, such as acacia, alfalfa, clover, sage, and tupelo, are best for baking and featuring in raw preparations, such as vinaigrettes and beverages. Darker honeys, including eucalyptus and buckwheat, which taste fuller and less floral, are best for sauces and glazes. Honey dissolves easily into uncooked recipes, like blended smoothies and marinades. Use it as a natural binder for granola bars and as a sweetener in savory sauces, soups, and dips.

Honey tastes sweeter than sugar, so use less ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup honey to 1 cup sugar) when substituting, and lower the oven temperature 25 degrees to prevent browning. Also, reduce the liquid in a recipe by $\frac{1}{4}$ cup per 1 cup of honey used. For baked goods, start by substituting up to half of the sugar in the recipe with honey, then experiment with more. Plus, add $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda for every cup of honey used. **When shopping, consider single-variety honeys,** which are distillations of nectar from one plant or tree and will be clearly marked on the bottle and have a distinct flavor. If it's not marked, or is labeled wildflower honey, it was made from a mix of floral sources and will likely be boldly flavored. **Cut out refined sugar, but stay sweet with honey.** Honey is naturally produced and contains small amounts of many vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and antioxidants. It also provides a quick source of energy and is useful for treating minor burns and scrapes and for helping treat sore throats and other bacterial infections. Do not give babies under one year of age honey, as it can be a source of infant botulism. ●