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Celebrating the Bounty of the Lowcountry, Season by Season

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CLAMS · LOCAL HONEY · CHEF FRANK LEE
THE GRAND STRAND · CORNBREAD NATION CUVÉE

FROM THE LAND

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KRISTEN GEORGE

HONEY, PLEASE!

*The only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey
... and the only reason for making honey is so I can eat it.*

—Winnie the Pooh, *House at Pooh Corner* by A.A. Milne

Robert Biggerstaff isn't quite sure what drew him to beekeeping. He says he just decided one day that he wanted a hive of bees. "I just felt like I wanted some bees," Biggerstaff recalls. "It was sort of like how you decide you want a dog." So, in 1967 Biggerstaff purchased his first hive for \$15 and it's been a sweet love affair ever since. Not that his hobby started out easily. "I didn't know what to do with the bees," he says. "I didn't even know how to get them home." Biggerstaff's famous Sea Islands' Gold honey comes from the pollination on select Lowcountry farms and nearly 40 years experience.

Nature probably doesn't produce a finer elixir than sweet, golden honey. Perhaps the world's perfect sweetener, honey is delicious drizzled on piping hot homemade biscuits and lends the perfect hint of sweetness to a bowlful of freshly picked berries. It is rich in vitamins, minerals and antioxidants; has antiseptic and moisturizing properties; and for many people eating "local" honey provides relief from seasonal allergies.

And yet, while Winnie the Pooh had the right idea about eating honey, what he didn't realize was that the world of bees encompasses so much more than simply making honey. "Bees are just the coolest of insects," says Ted Dennard, Georgia beekeeper and owner of Savannah Bee Company. "When you're standing in a hive, surrounded by the sights, sounds and colors of the bees, as they wiggle around and fan their wings drawing out the nectar, making honey, it's like meditating. It's a calming, relaxing experience."

Archie Biering, owner of Bee City in Cottageville, has been fascinated by the tiny,

buzzing insects since he was a child helping his father tend his hives. "God must have put more mystery in a hive of honeybees than anywhere else in the world—including mankind," Biering says. "You simply can't figure out how they do the things they do."

Outside the hive, bees are an integral part of our agricultural system. According to the National Honey Board, about one-third of the human diet is derived from insect-pollinated plants and honeybees are responsible for 80 percent of this pollination. In fact, a Cornell University study of honeybee pollination shows increased quality and yield of crops valued at more than \$14.6 billion per year. Many fruits, vegetables and legumes depend on insect pollination. Some like tomatoes, have light pollen that can be wind-blown from flower to flower, others have heavy, sticky pollen that can only be transferred by insects.

"Bees have been evolving with the plant world for millions of years," Dennard says. "They've got this symbiotic relationship with plants and it's amazing because it helps the environment. Because of bees, there's a lot more food out there for animals, including humans."

In generations past, colonies of honeybees were abundant in the wild. But over the last two decades, wild honeybees have been driven nearly to extinction by parasitic mites and beetles. Because of this, the need for beekeepers is greater than ever. Beekeepers monitor their colonies and use a variety of methods for keeping their hives healthy and productive. Without the bees, crops are not nearly as plentiful or flavorful.

"I've been farming on Edisto all of my life and my family's farmed there five or six generations before me," says Rhett King of King's Market. "When I was a kid, there were always wild bees in the live oaks. Now though, that population has been devastated. I depend on people like Mr. Biggerstaff for his bees. A lot of people don't realize the importance of honeybees. According to Lynda Denaro of Tiverton Farms it is a simple matter, "If we want food, we need bees."

According to apiarist Mike Hood of Clemson University, beekeepers do a big favor for the home gardener as well. Bees travel up to two and a half miles from their hives so a hobbyist beekeeper who manages four or five colonies may be providing pollination free of charge to hundreds of home gardens.



The secret of my health is applying honey inside and oil outside.

—Democritus, pre-Socratic philosopher
(who allegedly lived to be 109)

“A good number of my customers ask for Mr. Biggerstaff’s honey,” Rhett King says. “They say it helps with their allergies.” Seasonal allergies are generally a reaction to pollen in the air. Pollen, as well as plant nectar, is present in honey so people who regularly eat local honey may be building up resistance. For honey to be an effective anti-allergen, it must come from local bees. According to Hood, “The nectar and pollen used to make commercial honey won’t likely help build resistance to the local types of pollen that cause seasonal allergies.”

Chewing propolis, a sticky resin the bees secrete and use as a glue to secure the honeycomb to the walls of the hive, is recognized as a way to help ease the pain of a sore throat. Archie Biering’s wife, Diane, says she doesn’t sell propolis but scrapes the waxy glue off of her hives and bottles it for herself and her friends. “I always try to have some on hand,” she says. “My friends will stop by or call me to see if I have a bottle of propolis to get them through the winter.”

*The pedigree of honey does not concern the bee.
A clover, any time, to him is aristocracy.*

—Emily Dickinson, *The Pedigree of Honey*

To collect and bottle a “unique” or “single source” honey, beekeepers must ensure that that honey comes from one specific source. For example, tupelo honey comes from the nectar of tupelo gum trees. For beekeepers to call their honey tupelo, they must be certain that the majority of the honey was made with pollen from tupelo trees. If hives produce honey from more than a single source, it is simply called wildflower honey.

To produce his single source honeys, Biggerstaff places his hives in specific areas of the Lowcountry and in North Carolina. “I get sourwood honey from my hives in the mountains of North Carolina,” Biggerstaff says. “Sourwood is the Cadillac of honeys.”

And right he is. The dark, creamy, rich flavor of sourwood is more complex than the lighter, fruitier tupelo. South Carolina’s diverse terrain allows for an impressive variety of honey that can be produced by the State’s 2,000 beekeepers. The mountains, sandhills, piedmont and coastal regions each have different nectar sources including cotton, sparkleberry, blackberry, gallberry and yellow poplar—in addition to tupelo and sourwood.

According to the National Honey Board, bees may travel 55,000 miles and gather nectar from more than two million flowers to make just one pound of honey. Once they collect enough nectar, the worker honeybees add enzymes and reduce the moisture of the sweet liquid, transforming it into honey. They store the honey in waxy cells within the hive. The honeycomb is edible



Beekeeper, Robert Biggerstaff

and many people prefer cut-comb honey which is honey bottled along with a piece of comb.

“People like chewing the comb just as you would a piece of gum. It has everything in it that’s good in the hive—honey, pollen, and propolis,” says Diane Biering. “A lot of people, though, like cut comb honey for nostalgia. That’s how everybody’s grandfather had his honey.” Archie Biering vividly recalls this old-fashioned way of collecting honey.

“My dad would go out to his hives with a dishpan, cut the honeycomb by hand and squeeze the honey out. He never wore a veil or had any kind of equipment,” says Archie, who, like his father, goes without a veil. “I probably get 30-40 stings a day during peak season.”

Today, beekeepers use a slightly more sophisticated process to collect honey. Once the rectangular honeycomb frames are removed from each hive, they use a hot knife to slice the outer layer of wax away from the comb. Then each honeycomb frame is placed in the circular bin of a honey extractor, which spins and extracts the honey using centrifugal force. The honey is then ready for bottling. To preserve its nutrients, most beekeepers don't filter, heat or otherwise process the honey. They simply bottle it, raw and pure.


There are certain pursuits which, if not wholly poetic and true, do at least suggest a nobler and finer relation to nature than we know—the keeping of bees, for instance.

—Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*


While farmers and beekeepers certainly understand the importance of the honeybee, many others do not. In order to attract and train new beekeepers, the South Carolina Beekeepers Association offers introductory beekeeping classes throughout the year. For experienced beekeepers there is also the Master Beekeeper Program.

"We have lost more than 90 percent of our wild bees and while we hope one day they spring back, right now we've got to have beekeepers to help the bees," says Diane Biering. She and Archie regularly teach the introductory beekeeping classes at Bee City. In addition, they host meetings of the Lowcountry Beekeepers Association.

The Bierings go beyond training new adult beekeepers though. They hope to spark the interest of the next generation, making education one of the main focuses of Bee City. While they spend most of the spring and summer gathering and bottling their pure tupelo honey—sold at several Lowcountry locations—their main focus during the fall, winter and early spring months is hosting school field trips. At Bee City, students observe bees busily making honey while feeding and protecting the queen bee. Students pour their own honey, make beeswax candles and figurines, and learn all kinds of interesting facts about bees. "Most kids know that bees make honey but we want them to know just how much bees contribute to the whole world," Diane says. □



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DETAILS

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843-835-5912
www.beecity.net

Also Available at: Earth Fare (Mt. Pleasant & West Ashley); Teavana (Downtown Charleston), Raspberry's (West Ashley), Health Nuts (North Charleston), Books, Herbs & Spices (Downtown Charleston); God's Green Acre (Summerville), Coastal Produce (Summerville); GNC (Walterboro)

Sea Islands' Gold Honey

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Also Available at: Rosebank Farms, (Johns Island); King's Market (Edisto); Boone Hall (Mt. Pleasant); Irvin House Vineyards, Leland Farms (Wadmalaw Island)

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Also Available at: Mepkin Abbey, Ed's Roadside Market Hwy 52 (Moncks Corner)

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