

Super Secret
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GARDEN & GUN

APRIL/MAY 2009

SOUL of the NEW SOUTH

The Last
Shrimpers
of Louisiana

The
World's
Purest
Honey

The
South's
Best Gun
Engraver

Bourbon
the Old-
Fashioned
Way

The Smelly
Dog That
Changed
My Life
by John E.
Bradley

A large, leafy tree stands in a field, its canopy filling most of the upper half of the cover. The tree is dark green and has a thick trunk. The field below is a mix of green and brown, suggesting a rural or farm setting. The sky is a pale, overcast grey.

Back to the Land

Lessons from the South's Smartest Farm



Roy Blount, Jr., on Gardening Naked



Harvest

by DAN HUNTLEY

Liquid Gold

In the inland waterways of Florida's Panhandle, two men battle bears and sleep deprivation to harvest the world's purest honey

IT'S EARLY MORNING ON THE Apalachicola River, and patches of mist still cling to the cypress and Ogeechee tupelo trees deep in the coves of one of the largest riverine estuaries in North America. This is the Florida Panhandle, the last section of the state where natives still speak with a Southern accent. Here, about ten miles inland, the river is as wide as a football field.

Master beekeeper George Watkins signals to his partner, Jimmy Moses, to kill the outboard on the 16-foot flounder skiff, and we begin to drift along a shady bank near Bloody Bluff.

"Listen. Do you hear it?" Watkins whispers.

The only sound is water lapping against the wooden hull. But soon, a primal hum can be heard rising from the swamp.

"Those are my bees heading to work in the blossoms," Watkins says proudly as he pulls his boat alongside a long wooden platform built above the cypress knees. White wooden boxes of beehives are neatly stacked along the weathered dock. As the buzzing intensifies, you can feel the energy radiating up through the planks of the dock. Moses lightly pumps a metal smoker box of fat pine and sends a gentle waft of smoke over the hives to calm the bees. Watkins carefully removes a honeycomb tray about the size of a laptop. He takes a pocketknife to cut off the beeswax cap atop the honeycomb and offers a dollop of the pale gold ambrosia known as tupelo honey.

It smells like sweet butter with a speck of vanilla. Tupelo is the champagne of honeys. The taste is as delicate as a honeysuckle stamen. Because of tupelo's high ratio of levulose to dextrose sugars, tupelo is the only honey that diabetics, like Watkins, can



Labor of Love In the Apalachicola swamp forest, fourth-generation Apalachicola and master beekeeper George Watkins checks on his bees as they work their magic, transforming nectar from tupelo tree blossoms into golden tupelo honey.

safely eat. Pure tupelo—unfiltered and unheated straight from the hive—is the only honey that will not crystallize. Although the air is cool on the river this morning, the honey is still warm from the bees' bodies. "This honey was nectar in the tupelo blossoms twelve hours ago," Watkins says. "It doesn't get any fresher than warm from the hive."

A Narrow Window

THE ONLY PLACES TUPELO HONEY IS COMMERCIALY HARVESTED are in northwest Florida and southern Georgia where

the trees thrive along four rivers—the Apalachicola, Chipola, Ochlocknee, and Choctahatchee. White tupelo trees (*Nyssa ogeche*) blossom for three to four weeks in late April and early May. During that time, local beekeepers extract any residual honey from their hives of other blossoms and set out the empty hives as close as they can to the massive stands of tupelo.

Most beekeepers simply drive their trucks to a site to offload their hives. But a few stalwarts like Watkins do it the labor-intensive, old-fashioned way. He and Moses, who have been partners for more than fifteen years, load the hives onto a home-built 10-by-30-foot barge and head up the river. They carry the hives deep into the tupelo groves, waiting until the day the first thimble-size green blossoms appear on the trees to allow the bees to forage.

“It is a good bit of trouble, but if you want the purest tupelo, you have to get the bees as close as possible to the biggest concentration of blossoming tupelos,” Watkins says. Biologists estimate it takes two million flowers to produce one pound of honey. One honeybee produces about 1/2 of a teaspoon in its lifetime. “Plus, your timing is critical. You have to wait until the last possible moment to pull the bees from the other blossoms. And just as soon as the last tupelo blossoms fall from the trees, you’ve got to get the bees out of there and extract the tupelo honey from the hives.”

A Labor of Love

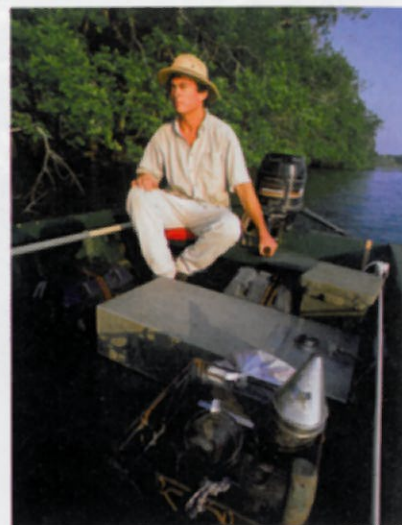
IN TUPELO SEASON, THE HARVEST IS AN INTENSE 24-7 PROCESS, as chronicled in the 1997 film *Ulee’s Gold*. Peter Fonda was nominated for an Academy Award for his role as a forlorn beekeeper who works so hard he falls asleep while extracting his beloved tupelo honey. “It’s a lot of hard work in a short amount of time,” says Watkins, who worked as a consultant on the film. “You try to pace yourself as best you can, but there are variables like the rain and wind, and then there’s the river. Anything you do in a boat can get complicated real quick.”

Like the time Watkins and Moses’s barge was so loaded with honey-laden hives that the deck of the boat was four inches above the water and nearly swamped in a wake on the Intracoastal Waterway. Or the time they checked their hives by the river and a black bear had clawed open every hive and slurped out the honey. They now use an electric fence to guard against the bears. Unlike Florida orange farmers, Watkins considers himself lucky. In sixteen years, he’s had only two bad crops due to weather.

On this Saturday morning, he and Moses are in the honey house, which is basically a closed-in garage. They’re emptying the hon-



Secret Treasure Left: Watkins’s tupelo honey is found on the shelves of several local Apalachicola shops, but with limited supply, it is rarely found outside of town. Right: Watkins heads upriver to harvest his tupelo honey. Each spring, he places his hives deep in the backwater swamps to collect the prized honey.



eycombs by scraping the caps off the combs and placing the trays in a large centrifuge, which “slings” the honey out of the combs. It is cool inside the house, and the honey flows like lava. A half dozen honeybees have hitched a ride on the hundreds of stacked trays waiting for extraction and are now buzzing harmlessly by a sunny window.

The honey seeps down the sides of the extractor and is then pumped into a holding tank. The two men then individually bottle and label their product. In a good year, they will produce eighteen to twenty 55-gallon barrels. Watkins acknowledges it’s a lot of work on the river for a relatively small volume of honey, most of which is sold locally through mom-and-pop convenience stores, groceries, and bait shops. Demand for their premium honey is so great that they have given up their mail-order business because they can barely supply their hometown customers. One customer, Homer Marks, was so adamant about getting Watkins’s freshest tupelo that he would bring his own pickle jars to the honey house to be filled as soon as the honey came out of the extractor. “About a hundred and fifty hives is our capacity because you have an obligation to do right by your bees and you can’t rush them. They’re already working pretty darn hard rushing back and forth to the blossoms.”

The bottom line, Watkins says, is that tupelo honey making is long hours with little pay. “You do it because you love it, not because you’ll get rich, because you ain’t.”

To view recipes using tupelo honey, go to gardenandgun.com, and to order your own tupelo, go to savannahbee.com.