

incredibly EDIBLE

PURE CHICAGO HONEY FROM THE WILD SIDE OF THE CITY

BY LYNN PEEMOELLER

The good stuff, the *real* taste of Chicago, straight from the honey beehive. This honey is made from the hard work of millions of fuzzy little creatures that busily buzz about the city, exploring every tree, plant, and bush looking for flowers where they intimately enter the nooks and crannies and carry home the sweet nectar. Back at the ranch, they share it with their queen in apartment-like hives. Through an amazing alchemy of enzymes and evaporation it gets turned into honey, Chicago honey, a complex flavor profile of Chicago's wild side.

Urban honey production is an idea that's time has come. All over the country from Brooklyn to Oakland, and Chicago in between, on rooftops, abandoned lots, and backyards people are tending honeybees for personal consumption and for profit. And, why not? The city is just as good a place as any to raise bees.

For a few years now I've been admiring urban beekeeping, especially the work of Michael Thompson, one of a few people I know who lives out his dream by producing honey from hives tucked away in secret corners of Chicago, including Mayor Richard M. Daley's rooftop garden, an oasis above the urban rush of the concrete streets below. He is one of three people who founded



the Chicago Honey Cooperative in 2004, a small sustainable honey business that hires under-employed people.

I set up a time to visit Michael at one site of the Honey Coop on Chicago's West Side in the North Lawndale neighborhood where, on that day, he was working with Rhonda, a job trainee from the neighborhood who has been tending bees with Michael for several years.

Tended by community members and nourished by mounds of compost, lush watermelon vines tangle with sweet potatoes and curl around cabbage heads. The Coop has had a positive impact in the community not only by providing jobs, but also by creating a garden without rules where people can experiment with growing their own food.

The task of the day was opening newly established hives and releasing the queens into them where all the worker bees would follow. I watched with amazement as Michael and Rhonda delicately opened each hive, gently lifting the humming racks of busy bees and carefully placing them to the side so they could reach in and release the queen.

Honeybees are beautiful, gentle creatures with an amazing mission to explore their region and forage for what bounties lay within flower petals.

In the early days of a Chicago summer, bees forage from dandelions, apple and cherry blossoms. They also

WHERE TO FIND CHICAGO HONEY COOP PRODUCTS

The Chicago Honey Cooperative sells honey, beeswax candles, and some body care product at the following farmers markets June-December: Chicago's Green City Market, The Logan Square Farmers Market and the Oak Park Farmers Market. Chicago Coop Honey is also featured in several Chicago restaurants like Crust, Lula Café and Uncommon Ground.

For more information visit www.chicagohoneycoop.com



Photograph courtesy of Chicago Honey Co-op

Photographs: Carole Topalian

draw pollen from linden trees, producing one of honey's most coveted flavors. Later in the summer they will gather from sweet clover.

Each honey harvest has its own unique flavor profile—based on the whims of the season and the characteristics of the environment from which it comes. I learned that hives usually produce two harvests each year: the early season, which is usually lighter in color and flavor like the scent of a cool spring night in a flower garden, and the late season, which is darker and heavier like the tangy sultriness of summer in the city.

Michael cracked open a hive and scraped a gob of honeycomb for me. Reaching under my net, I brought my fingers to my mouth and sucked up the gooeyness. Chewy, pleasantly waxy and warm, sweet honey squished around in my mouth, a sandy ball of pollen dissolved on my tongue amidst an explosion of sparkling summer flowers.

It's been said that eating local honey is good for acclimating one's body to the environment and especially good for combating seasonal allergies. By taking in local honey with all of its nutrition, vitamins and pollen it actually helps boost your body's immunities and helps bring a little bit of the outdoor urban environment inside of you. This is the true taste of Chicago, the good stuff.

Lynn Peemoeller has her hands in the dirt right along with the farmers she supports through her work as an independent consultant on sustainable agriculture projects. She is also on the local board of directors for Slow Food Chicago.

THE MAYOR'S ROOFTOP GARDEN

The spectacular rooftop garden on top of City Hall was originally inspired by Mayor Daley's visit to Germany, where green roofs were considered an urban agricultural norm. The mayor's rooftop garden was conceived in 2000 to test how it affects temperature and air quality. Within a half-acre—one city block in length—and 11 stories above the streets below, this garden oasis contains more than 100 species of plants, shrubs, vines and trees. Mostly native, they will withstand Chicago's extreme weather conditions.

The urban space is also a wildlife habitat, where more than three dozen species of birds come to nest, and an array of monarch butterflies grace the garden. In spring of 2003, two bee hives were introduced, housing more than 200,000 honey bees that help pollinate the plants and are said to produce some of the best honey in the windy city.

City environmental officials say the plants also reduce pollution and improve air quality. The rooftop garden helps cool the building in the summer and insulates it in the winter, resulting in dramatic energy savings. It also absorbs up to 75% of a one inch rainfall which helps prevent storm water runoff into the city's sewers. Mayor Daley's urban rooftop garden program has inspired nearly 400 businesses around the city to go green on the roof. Chicago is now considered to have one of the most extensive rooftop garden programs in the world.



Please note: The City Hall rooftop garden is not open to the public.