
THINGS ARE A'BUZZIN', A'BLEATIN', AND A'GOBBLIN' IN KNIGHTSEN

STORY AND PHOTOS BY WANDA HENNIG

If you think the idea of the pioneer woman is at odds with that of the 21st-century inventive, adaptive, independent superwoman, you haven't met Debbie Holeman. To visit her down-home spread in rural east Contra Costa County is to be delighted and surprised. On one occasion she might be making lavender mead; on the next, some version of goat cheese—or maybe an experimental version of unfiltered buttermilk. She grows her own veggies, milks her own goat, gathers eggs laid by her six chickens—and oversees some quarter of a million workers that live on her Knightsen property.

Worker bees, that is.

On our most recent visit, Holeman was trying to come up with a way to save what was left of a flock of heritage Royal Palm turkeys that live wild and breed in her five-acre backyard. A coyote had gobbled up half a dozen young'uns—and Holeman wanted to be sure there'd be some left for her to gobble up come Thanksgiving.



turkey, she should be prepared to catch it, and do it in, herself.

"I went out at night several times with a net but I couldn't get even one," she laughingly laments.

"I have a recipe for white goat-milk paint," she tells us. Her plan was to mark the females so they don't get bumped off by mistake at this year's turkey-dinner cull. "Last year I tried all manner of different ways to catch a couple of turkeys," she says.

Her intention was to get hold of them, slit their throats, cook one and give away any others she happened to nab. Holeman rarely eats meat, and only if she's raised the animal herself, or knows the person who has. And being a purist, it seemed only right that if she were going to eat a



Finally, she sought assistance. She knew that the eggs-for-sale roadside stand a few minutes' drive from her place was manned by an elderly gent who fixes lawnmowers. "I'd heard that his son was a taxidermist and that both of them were experienced hunters. So I asked them to come and shoot me a couple of turkeys."

The deal was that they'd get one each and she'd get one . . . "They got five with two shots," so a foodie friend in Brentwood with a large family got the other two.

It took Holeman an hour to dry-pluck her turkey. Then she popped it in the oven for an hour and 15 minutes.

"It was seven and a half pounds, my little turkey," she recalls with affection.

Just big enough for her.

"Yes," she acknowledges, "I spend Thanksgiving alone, so it was the perfect size."

She ate her homegrown turkey with fresh cranberries sent to her by a friend who lives in Oregon. "It was delicious," she notes in anticipation of, coyote permitting, a repeat performance this year.

BEE SEASON

Holeman's main avocation is beekeeping. She has 22 wooden bee boxes on her property, five in a cherry orchard in Brentwood; two in Oakley backyards; three on other Knightsen properties, and two on Tairwá Knoll Farms, where renowned Brentwood agriculturalists and rural community leaders Christie and Rick Knoll grow produce that is well known to discerning fresh-and-local supporters.

She adds a slug of goat's milk and a generous spoonful of her Knightsen Honey Company nectar to a mug of coffee she's just

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brewed. We watch the nearly opaque liquid amber flow lazily into the hot brew. To eat her honey unadulterated is to feel it pause, not-too-sweet, on the tongue, then slide languorously down the throat. The flavor is complex. The honey's journey from bee to jar is uninterrupted by heat or machinery.



"I used to spin it, but now I let the honey sit in the wax and pollen and drain itself. That way it gets saturated with more good things," says Holeman.

She sounds like she's just unwrapped an exciting gift each time she tells you about something she's trying that's new for her, or something she's discovered—be it with her honey, a goat cheese experiment, the mead she's making, her vinegar, or all sorts of other farm-style things.

"Try this," she says, pointing to the large half-filled glass carboy—mead in progress—on the kitchen floor. "I've flavored this one with habanero peppers. It's still bubbling so it's not quite ready yet. Don't you love the blurr, blurr, blurr sound of it fermenting? It's like a presence in the kitchen." She pours some into a glass. "Do you like the flavor? Good!" She sounds delighted.

In answer to questions about the mead-making process, she says she puts 60 percent honey and 40 percent water into a glass, leaves it standing at room temperature in her kitchen until a layer of wild yeast develops, then transfers the mix to a glass carboy "like you'd use for [making] wine."

Then you keep adding to it, she says. "Too much water gives you vinegar. You have to keep it sealed. You can flavor the mead with berries or anything you like. When it stops bubbling, it's ready to drink." (For equipment and information on making mead, Holeman recommends Beer, Beer and More Beer in Concord; 925-671-4958, www.morebeer.com.)

"Do you want to try a slice of this tart?" Holeman continues. "I grew the Swiss chard. I've been experimenting with the crust." She says she might add a pie, this year, to her one-person Thanksgiving feast. Her enthusiasm is infectious. It makes you want to try everything, spend time with her and learn all she has to share.

Holeman has worked bees for 12 years. "I love bees," she says. "I love to touch them, hold them, look at them. And the bees like me," she laughs as she walks us from hive to hive. She will not stress her bees to get them to produce more honey, as some beekeepers do. Neither will she kill a queen, which is a practice some beekeepers advise.

"I'm doing everything biodynamically these days," she declares. Thus, despite the intensive labor and higher costs involved, she personally handcrafts individual wood-and-wax bee racks and has eliminated all plastic from her hives.

Harvesting the contents of the honeycombs in summer and fall is akin to a religious experience for her. She harvests one hive a day, going about the task "gently and slowly," rarely wearing protective gear, and being careful not to remove too much honey. She lifts



the wooden frames containing the combs from the hives and transports them by wheelbarrow to her kitchen. She runs a cold uncapping knife along the combs to remove the thin layer of wax covering the cells. Most beekeepers use a hot knife to quickly melt the wax, but Holeman doesn't want any heat compromising the integrity of her product.

"I make it the way I like it," she explains, fully aware and unconcerned that she cannot compete with beekeepers whose hives number thousands. "I want to stay small. It's harder in terms of business because people want the cheapest food they can find. But I'd rather keep the quality high and find people who are willing to pay a little more for better honey."

You won't find Holeman's honey on a supermarket shelf. Instead, you must drive east on Highway 4 to Byron Highway North, then follow it to a sign announcing "Honey for Sale." Turn into the gravel driveway. Climb the steps to the porch, where an old kitchen table serves as display case. Lay down your \$6 or \$10 for a jar, creamed honey or comb honey—the prices are listed—beneath the lid of the butter dish left there for that purpose. And be transported.

In addition to selling from her front porch, Holeman sells at the farmers market in Brentwood and at Smith Family Farms, 4430 Sellers Avenue in Brentwood. She sells small amounts of beeswax and goat-milk soap, and she's starting to think of her goat cheese in commercial terms. She cannot sell her mead. That's not legal. But she can give it away. I have a small bottle of her lavender-flavored mead in my refrigerator—but one more of Holeman's sweet temptations to try. 🐝

Debbe Holeman's hive of activity and the Knightsen Honey Company are located at 9255 Byron Hwy., Knightsen. Holeman can be reached at (925) 634-4584.



DEBBE HOLEMAN'S CHARD TART

- 1 pound Swiss chard leaves (about two bunches)
- 3 large eggs
- Salt/pepper to taste
- 1 cup grated Parmesan or crumbled goat milk cheese
- 1 cup unbleached flour
- A pinch of salt
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup chard water

Wash the chard leaves but do not dry them. Place in a covered pot and steam the chard on medium low heat until wilted. Drain, saving the chard water for use in the pie crust, allowing the water to cool and adding additional water, if necessary, to make ¼ cup.

Place flour, salt, and olive oil in a bowl. Stir lightly with a fork as you add enough of the chard water to make the dough form into a ball. Press into a 9-inch pie pan.

Lightly whisk the eggs in a bowl, add cheese and mix. Chop the steamed chard leaves and add to the egg mixture. Add salt and pepper to taste. Transfer filling to unbaked piecrust. Bake at 400° for 40 minutes. Cool and serve at room temperature.

Wanda Hennig is an Oakland-based writer and life coach. A native South African who learned about good food and eating well from a Polish father, she got involved in the East Bay foodie scene when editor of /Diablo/ magazine and later, /Black Diamond Living./ She writes regularly about food for /Oakland /and /Alameda /magazines. Previously, when bureau chief of the South Africa edition of Cosmopolitan, she regularly explored health and fitness issues. She uses a "Slow, Green, Zen" approach when coaching clients around food.