

HIVES ALIVE!

BY KRISTIN COURTEMANCHE

That buzzing sound you hear may be the economy finally getting under way, but more likely it is the collective cacophony of bees around the Bay as apiarists open their hives to see how they have fared through winter. Honeybees, winged producers of the golden elixir historically revered for both its medicinal properties and sheer sticky goodness, emerge in early spring ready to rebuild their colonies and begin the work of collecting nectar—a not insignificant task, considering that bees are responsible for pollinating a sizable portion of the world's food crops.

Humanity's relationship to honey dates back thousands of years, evidenced by Mesolithic cave drawings of women gathering wild honey, and vessels of honey found entombed in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. References to honey are found in the Old Testament, the Qu'ran and Buddhist texts; and the Mayans were one of the first civilizations known to have practiced bee husbandry, occasionally imbibing a drink of fermented, hallucinogenic honey in ritual practices as well.

Even non-hallucinogenic honey has somewhat mystical properties. Long used as a topical healing agent for wounds and burns, and as a balm for sore throats, honey is now known to possess antibacterial and antiseptic attributes. One variety, manuka honey, is actually thought to be beneficial in treating "superbugs" like MRSA (methicillin resistant staphylococcus aureus). There is also anecdotal evidence that consuming local, raw honey can mitigate hay fever symptoms in some sufferers by introducing pollen into the body in such low quantities that the immune system becomes acclimated to its presence and "unlearns" its histamine response.

TROUBLE IN THE HIVE

Sadly, our honey stores—and their winged manufacturers—are disappearing: since 2006, a phenomenon called Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) has been troubling scientists and beekeepers alike. CCD is a syndrome in which thousands of bees mysteriously vanish from their hives during a winter, around 50 percent of the entire population by some counts, and many of the remaining population are found to be sick or dying.

Theories explaining CCD abound, ranging from poor nutrition to cell phone towers, but the most widely accepted is that of stressed immune systems due to environmental factors such as the agricultural industry's widespread use of pesticides. Many commercial beekeepers believe a particular group of pesticides called neonicotinoid chemicals are largely

responsible for CCD, and in fact France and Germany have gone so far as to ban their use entirely, citing devastating losses to their bee populations as the reason. In the meantime, significant losses to food crops are beginning to be seen as a result of CCD, most notably to the almond harvest here in California last year.

HONEY HOBBYIST

Backyard beekeepers, though, are a quietly ubiquitous bunch. Bill Thompson, resident of Canyon (the wee, unincorporated hamlet just east of the Oakland hills), says, "You'd be surprised how many people have one or two hives in their back yard." Bill himself has kept bees for the last 10 years or so, beginning when a wild swarm showed up in the base of a cherry tree in his yard. He had a young son toddling around at the time, and like most anyone would, freaked out and wanted the bees gone. He called a neighbor he knew who used to keep bees and asked for help getting rid of them. The neighbor said, "No, no, I'll bring you down a box—you're a beekeeper now."

The neighbor showed up with the box and began very gently rooting around in the big ball of swarming bees with a shovel, until he found the queen. "He scooped up the queen and stuck her in the box," remembers Bill, "and the rest of the bees just got up and calmly walked into the hive after her, like robots. And that was it—I was hooked."

That night he went out and bought some books, and the next day began beekeeping in earnest. "It's actually pretty lackadaisical work, as a hobbyist, anyway," he says, though he does check in on the hives every week or two. "Springtime is the most labor intensive; there's a certain amount of hive management that needs to happen then," such as rotat-

ing boxes between hives or swapping frames of honeycomb or even bees, if some hives aren't producing as well as others and need some bolstering. "But in the summer, you just basically watch them, make sure they have enough room in the hive so they don't swarm," which is accomplished by adding additional boxes, or supers, as they're called, on top of the hive.

He may be downplaying the amount of work, if only slightly: In the early winter, bees usually need to be medicated for mites, the timing of which is more complicated than the actual administration. Placing the Apistan strips in the hives is a relatively quick process, but determining when to do it can make all the difference in terms of the honey harvest. Because the Apistan is beneficial to bees but harmful to humans, none of the honey produced when the strips

PICKLED GINGER

Eric Gower, Bay Area author and chef, says honey figures frequently in his cuisine. This recipe for Pickled Ginger, from his book *The Breakaway Cook*, calls for orange blossom honey—but he assures that you can use any kind you've got handy:

1 cup very thinly sliced (shaved) fresh ginger

½ cup black raspberry vinegar

½ cup rice vinegar

3 tablespoons orange blossom honey

Set a small saucepan of water to boil. Peel the ginger and, with a mandoline, slice it very thinly until you have one cup of it (one large root will accomplish this). Blanch in the boiling water for about 2 minutes. Drain and transfer to a jar big enough to comfortably hold it. Pour the vinegars and honey into the jar and mix. The flavors will develop immediately, and you can use it right away, but the depth and complexity only get better with time. Keeps for at least a few months in the fridge.

are in the hive can be consumed, usually a period of 45 to 52 days. When spring comes early, as it did a couple of years ago for Bill, all the fruit trees blossom and “the bees go crazy, making tons and tons of honey, but I couldn’t use any of it.” By the time he could take out the medication, the honey was largely gone.

Bill has definitely noticed that the years when his bees, or “the Grrlzz,” as he fondly calls them, do have plenty of time with the cherry and plum blossoms in his garden, the honey itself is decidedly sweeter. “The eucalyptus and bay trees give it a bit of a nice tang, but yeah, all the stone fruit blossoms make it incredibly sweet. The years when the timing isn’t right, the honey is much flatter, just not as good.” It’s reciprocal, too: having so many bees (he keeps four hives currently) on his property means everything gets industriously cross-pollinated and produces very well. “In May we typically have so many cherries we harvest them just by cutting branches off,” Bill says. “We have people over every weekend, picking all day long and going home with pounds and pounds of cherries.”

BEE WHISPERING

What is it like to be up close and personal with thousands of bees? Every hive is different, Bill says, “some are angry all the time, some are really calm. Every time I open up the hive, I have to be conscious of their mood that day. Sometimes I’ll crack it open and they’ll crawl right out on my arm. Other times discretion really is the better part of valor—they’ll come buzzing out mad and I’ll have to leave it for another day.”

He confirms the truth in every mother’s wisdom: don’t bother the bees and they won’t bother you. Of course, a beekeeper by default has to bother the bees sometimes, and that’s why most wear their protective suits when working with the hives. As well as external protective gear, the beekeeper needs to be prepared mentally and have an internal sense of calm and purpose. Planning the operation in advance, laying the tools out within reach, and making every move deliberate and slow are all vital techniques for painless beekeeping. “Sometimes you get stung anyway, but *don’t* get upset and start swatting, because they’re kind of like Hell’s Angels: if one bee gets in a fight, all bees must get in the fight,” Bill jokes. He also points out that harvesting honey is really just stealing, and he doesn’t fault the bees for getting annoyed.

Bill confesses that at first, he thought he would have a companionable relationship with the bees, that he’d sing to them, read poetry to them; they would become his friends. But the Grrlzz aren’t really aware of him, unless he’s in their way or mucking about with the hives. He



does talk to them when he’s working with them, because he wants them to be used to the sound of his voice. But as far as a kinship or camaraderie, they’re simply far too busy and focused to register his presence. Still, he finds hanging out with the bees a uniquely enjoyable experience. “It’s truly fascinating. Sometimes I’ll go out there in the morning with a cup of coffee and just watch them work.” And at an annual yield of around 130 pints of honey, they truly are as busy as, well, bees.

BECOME A BACKYARD BEEKEEPER

Bill Thompson encourages doing the research first, and he recommends these books as a good place to start.

- *The Art & Adventure of Beekeeping* by Ormond & Harry Aebi
- *The ABC and XYZ of Bee Culture: An Encyclopedia of Beekeeping* by Roger Morse

He also suggests joining a local bee association; see honeybee.com/beeclubs.htm for a list of local clubs. “If you can, find a mentor,” Bill says, “learning about it hands-on is really the best. And if you do take up beekeeping, start with two hives. That way you have a reference; if one isn’t doing well you can tell by comparing it to the other.” Beekeeping supply shops also can provide a wealth of beekeeping tips and tricks. Bill likes the multi-generation, family-run Sacramento Beekeeping for his supplies: sacramentobeekeeping.com.

Finally, to see Bill himself at work with the bees, watch his video “Hiving the Noobees” at youtube.com/watch?v=gWdBrE8VGg0.

Kristin Courtemanche, a freelance writer with a passion for health, has written numerous articles on the future of healthcare, including an interview with Senator Bill Frist for the HIMSS Daily Insider about his views on national healthcare policy.