HOW SWEET IT IS: URBAN BEEKEEPING IN DETROIT

Story by Kim Bayer, photographs by Amanda Bayer

Throughout the nation, urban beekeeping is on the rise: New York City has its Rooftop Honey, Chicago has its Chicago Honey Cooperative and Detroit has Rich Wieske's 8 Mile Rd. Honey and his award-winning Wild Detroit Honey. For the past 8 years, Wieske, a Royal Oak native, has been caring for bees and making honey from hives located around Detroit. As part of his Green Toe Gardens business, Wieske sells honey at the Royal Oak Farmers' Market every other Saturday along with a selection of other Michigan varietal honeys, like Blueberry Blossom Honey and Star Thistle Honey, produced by other local beekeepers. In addition to making honey from his own 40-plus hives, Wieske cares for approximately 60 hives tucked away in Detroit neighborhoods.

Not only is Wieske a proponent of increasing the genetic diversity and hardiness of our local bees by raising and selling his own queen bees, he is also passionate about teaching people about bees and offers classes to help prospective backyard beekeepers get started. His 5-part series begins with building hive boxes, and progresses through inspecting the working hive, to harvesting the honey.

Buzzing along at up to15 miles per hour, bees can forage as far as 2 miles from home. To produce a pound of honey, bees fly approximately 55,000 miles in their quest to carry nectar back and forth from two million flower visits. The flowers' nectar, which starts out with 80% water content, evaporates—partially from fanning wings—to only 18% moisture when the bees cap it as honey. Wieske explains that Detroit is a good place to raise bees because the increasing numbers of urban and community gardens combined with productive fruit trees give his bees plenty of the

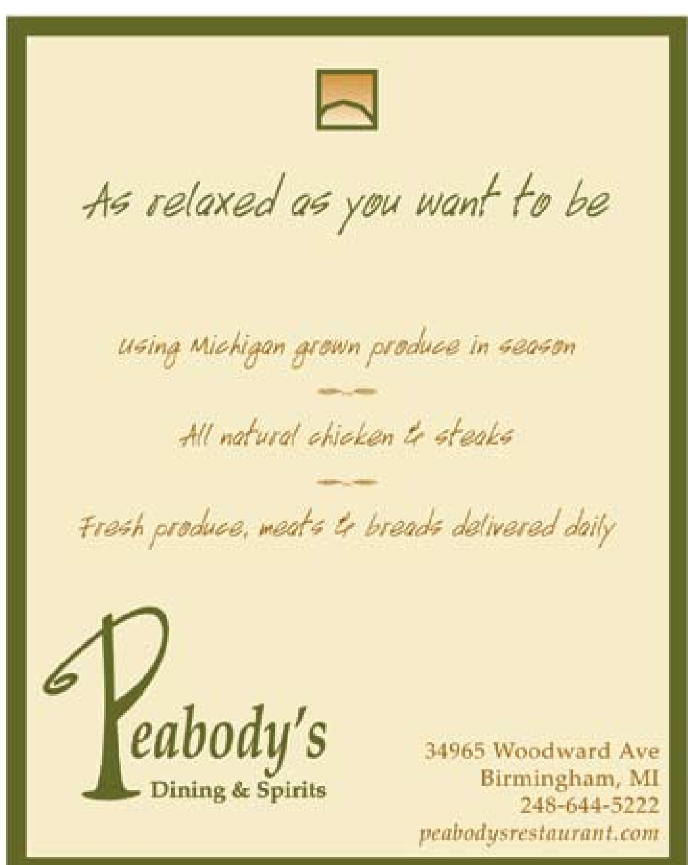
Photographs: Amanda Bayer

Kim Bayer writes about and photographs the food and farms of her beautiful home state of Michigan.

nectar they require to produce up to 80 pounds of honey per hive.

As a prime agricultural state, Michigan depends heavily on bees to pollinate many of its most important crops including cucumbers, blueberries, cherries and apples. The catastrophic decimation of bees from Colony Collapse Disorder (also called CCD or the Disappearing Disease) has been a frequent feature in the news because one out of every three of the foods we eat depends on bees to pollinate them. Without bees, we won't have favorite foods like cherries, blueberries or bread-and-butter pickles, to name a few.

As of 2007, Michigan was the 9th largest honey producer in the nation, with 72,000 colonies producing 4.61 million pounds of golden Michigan honey. But according to the Southeast Michigan Beekeeper's Association (SEMBA), during the last 25 years nearly half of North America's honeybee colonies have vanished. Like many other states,



Michigan has experienced losses in some areas of up to 90% of resident bee colonies. Those startling numbers motivate Wieske to mentor new beekeepers.

On a beautiful Sunday morning, Wieske paid a visit to the nine hives he supervises in the apple orchard at the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit. This visit had the dual purpose of checking on the hives and of instructing six first-time beekeepers in hive maintenance. Wieske explains that one of the most important techniques in working with bees is to move slowly and deliberately—abrupt movement can agitate them. He also recommends working on hives in the morning, because that is when the largest number of bees will be out foraging, and only half of a colony's 40,000-80,000 bees will be inside.

Each of the neophyte beekeepers in the class dons a white protective jacket that includes a hood with a mesh screen to cover their faces. One student fires up the bee-calming smoker, which looks like a coffee percolator with a wisp of smoke floating out of the spout. Each of the glove-clad beekeepers carries a single tool resembling a stout, foot-long prybar. This is the primary tool used, in fact, to pry out the bee and wax covered dividers that hold the honeycomb in the Langstroth-style hive boxes.

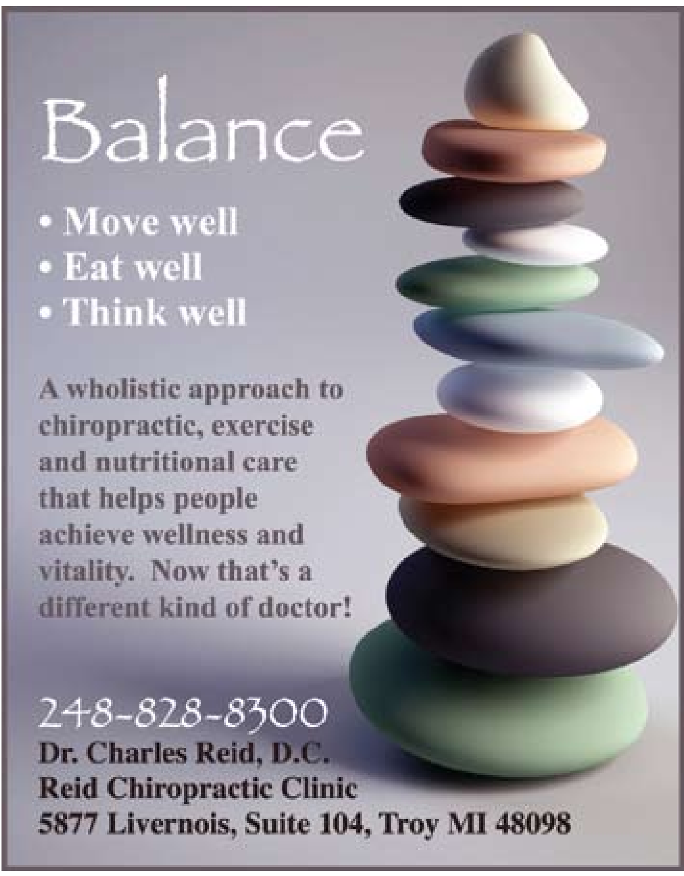
Wieske takes the top off each wooden hive box and pries dividers out of the middle to search for signs that the colony is thriving. The middle of the hive is where the queen should be surrounded by a large

number of attendants caring for the brood as she lays her body weight in eggs—up to 1,500 eggs a day. Signs of health include plentiful and well-formed honeycomb, a significant number of bees attending the queen, healthy numbers of eggs and larva and the formation of the enlarged cells called queen cups and queen cells.

With each hive he opens, Wieske's narrative about what he sees has the proud, protective and loving tone of a parent. He exclaims over the excellent comb of one and the gentle demeanor of another and the beautiful queen cells of a third. From one hive he offers a small piece of the raw honeycomb, dripping with honey. It tastes like actual liquid sunshine, flavored with discernible notes of individual flowers. What is incredible about this honey is how it reflects its provenance. Honey has varietals, just like wine—think of Michigan's Basswood honey or Buckwheat honey. But this sparkling buttery honey is the sweet golden taste of Detroit. It is hard to imagine anything tasting so good.

Suddenly, urban beekeeping is starting to make sense. With the critical importance of these fascinating creatures in our ecosystem, with the increased genetic diversity and hardiness of bees adapted to our area, and with the divine taste of this hometown honey, it is clear why new beekeepers are catching Rich Wieske's infectious passion for bees. Urban beekeeping reconnects people to the land as directly and effectively as community gardens and urban farms do. In all of these, Detroit is a model for the rest of the country.

Green Toe Gardens; www.greentoegardens.com



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