

Sticky stuff

Highly prized for its purity and health-promoting benefits – no wonder that production of honey is booming Down Under, writes **Philippa Jacks**



At 3am, while the rest of Tasmania is sound asleep, the beekeepers' work begins. Lindsay Bourke sets off from Launceston with his fragile cargo, headed for the rainforest in the west of the island. The tall, wooden boxes harnessed to the back of the truck are packed with thousands of hungry, sleepy honeybees.

When they wake up in the forest tomorrow, the bees will begin to feast on the pollen of the leatherwood tree, taking the nectar back to the hive, converting it to honey, and storing it in the honeycomb to sustain them through the winter.

Happily, the colony will make much more honey than it needs, so Lindsay and his team at Australian Honey Products can safely remove some of it to filter, package, and sell. But the early morning starts aren't the only downside to beekeeping. "I've had as many as 100 stings in one day," admits Lindsay. "I normally get

more like 50 a day which isn't too bad. It's mainly on your hands – we don't wear gloves as we might squash the queen bee. You get used to it, but it's still painful if they sting you on the fingertips or in your eye!"

Putting up with such pain has certainly paid off – Lindsay's honey has won Best Leatherwood Honey in Tasmania five of the past six years. I now eat it on toast for breakfast and can vouch for it being delicious. And Lindsay's honey mead – a fermented alcoholic drink – won gold at the last international World Honey Show.

BIG BEESNESS

Leatherwood is one of Australia's most famous honeys, and is unique to Tasmania. But the key production area is actually the temperate land from southern Queensland down to central Victoria.

There are over 10,000 beekeepers in Australia, with 600,000 hives spread across the country. Between 25-

honey
fact:

Honey was used extensively in Egyptian medicine – of over 900 remedies written down, 500 contained honey



30,000 tonnes of honey are produced each year. New Zealand has a substantial industry too, with 340,000 hives producing 12,300 tonnes of honey last year.

China is by far the world's biggest producer and exporter of honey, with Turkey, Argentina and the US also significant. However, the quality of Chinese honey is poorly rated, with antibiotic scares and sucrose and corn syrup used to water it down. Australian and Kiwi honey, by contrast, is prized for its purity.

There are over 20,000 known species of bee, but few of them are true honeybees, which build nests out of wax and make nectar into honey.

The European Honeybee (*Apis mellifera*), which was brought to Australia and New Zealand by early settlers, makes almost all the honey in these two countries.

Before visiting Australasia, I had no idea of the range of honey flavours which can be produced. Bees feeding on lavender bushes make lavender-infused honey,

while bees visiting thyme produce thyme honey, and so on. If the bees visit several different types of flower, they make a more generic, blended honey. But if bees are kept carefully, and feed on only one flower, they make a monofloral honey with a distinct taste.

LOCAL FLAVOUR

The range of flavours makes honey a fascinating ingredient to cook with.

Tasmania's famous Leatherwood honey is rich, dark and strong. Australian bush honey, on the other hand, has a spicy, peppery flavour, while clover honey is much more mildly flavoured.

Rodney Dunn owns Agrarian Kitchen, a cooking school and farm near Hobart which offers hands-on cooking classes such as 'Tomato gluttony' and 'The Whole Hog'. A qualified chef and trained under Tetsuya Wakuda, Rodney is one of Australia's best >>

Above Australian and Kiwi honey is big business, mostly because it is known for its purity



Right If bees feed on only one flower, they make a monofloral honey with a distinct taste

Far right Getting 50 stings a day is just part of the job for beekeeper Lindsay Bourke

Below There are many places Down Under where you can see how fresh honey is produced

chefs. Rodney says honey is an indispensable ingredient. “Honey in cooking offers more than just sweetness; its complex flavours add depth and intensity to food,” he says. “I love to use it, not just in sweet recipes but also to balance savoury dishes. Leatherwood works brilliantly in my braised rabbit recipe.”

Maureen Maxwell was a trained chef and had worked in the wine industry for many years when she decided to try beekeeping in her back garden near Auckland, New Zealand in 1999. She bought one hive from a newspaper advert, and in just six weeks she had a whole box of honey.

“I struggled into the kitchen with it, hauled it up on the bench, and we all had a taste,” she tells me. “It was one of those ‘Aha’ moments – we were so excited by this fresh warm honey, straight from the hive.”

She went from one to 15 hives within eight months, and was soon trading as Bees Online.

She was intrigued by how region and seasons create different tastes, just like wine, and saw that honey

“Honey in cooking offers more than just sweetness; its complex flavours add depth and intensity”

could be marketed in a similar way, with different vintages and regional specialities. Dark bush honeys, like red wine, go well with chilli, garlic and savoury flavours. Light, floral honeys, meanwhile, work like a dessert wine does with feminine flavours like vanilla, cinnamon and cream.

Maureen’s personal favourite is tawari honey, which she describes as a “luxurious, melt-in-the-mouth, white-chocolate dessert-type honey.” She might have as many as 15 different types of honey open in her pantry at any one time.

BEEES IN ACTION

Bees Online is one of the many places in Australia and New Zealand you can visit to see beekeeping in action and taste local honeys. At their site in Auckland, you can watch the fascinating honeybee in action in a bee ‘theatre’, as well as tour the honey production centre, try specialities in the restaurant and stock up on gourmet goods in the shop. There are also excellent visitor centres at Arataki Honey in Hawke’s Bay, and at Comvita near Te Puke, both on the North Island.

The Beechworth Honey Experience in Victoria is one of Australia’s newest honey-related tourist attractions. It offers free tours, a live bee display, and hands-on educational games for children. It has also tied up with celebrity chef Ed



Beekeepers are careful not to squash the queen bee; and (right) bees storing honey away

Halmagyi, and if you visit, you might catch him giving a demonstration of ways to cook with honey.

Kangaroo Island in South Australia is famous as the only place in the world where purebred bees of the unusual Ligurian species can still be found. You can taste honey ice-cream at Clifford’s Honey Farm, or take a tour at Island Beehive, which has won national awards for its organic honey.

And just south of Brisbane, there’s Superbee Honeyworld – a working honey factory which offers live bee shows, tastings and a factory outlet. Superbee also has a store in The Rocks district of Sydney.

HONEY FOR HEALTH

In addition to being extremely tasty, honey and its related products have massive health benefits. The most famous type for medicinal use is manuka honey, which

honey fact:

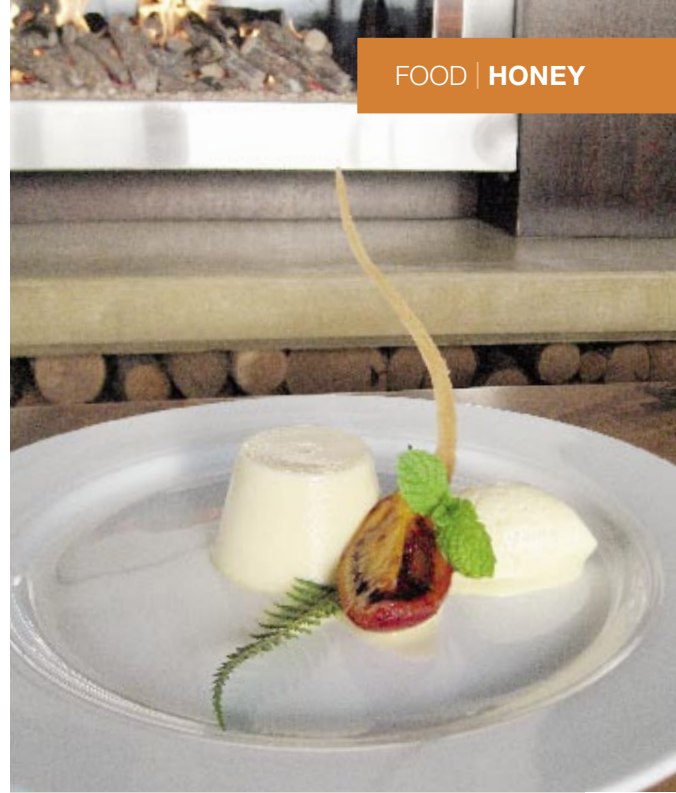
A single hive may typically contain between 40,000-50,000 bees

honey fact:

If kept properly, honey should keep indefinitely. It is said that honey found in 3,000-year-old Egyptian tombs is still edible!



Each honey bee makes only about a twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in its lifetime



Rata honey pannacotta

SERVES 4-6

- » Pre-soak three gelatin leaves in cold water.
 - » Put ¼ cup full-fat milk, 1 ¾ cups cream, 1 vanilla pod (split and seeds removed), and up to 100g rata honey in a saucepan. (Another mild, pale honey can be used). Bring it to a slow boil, then immediately remove from heat.
 - » Squeeze gelatin leaves to remove excess water, then add them to the hot cream mix. Stir well and cool.
 - » Skim the top off the mixture, then pour it into moulds. Refrigerate until set.
 - » Serve with fresh fruit, honey-sweetened whipped cream, fruit coulis or honey syrup.
- **Recipe from a new book by Maureen Maxwell, founder of Bees Online, Auckland, New Zealand**

is grown in New Zealand. Most honey has some antibacterial quality, but manuka honey is in a completely different league. It is exported all over the world to be used in wound dressings or to be taken orally to prevent infection. In the UK, manuka dressings have been available from the NHS on prescription since 2004.

But not all manuka has the same properties. Scientists at the University of Waikato in the North Island have been researching the honey for over 26 years. They have devised a rating system, similar to sunscreen, to indicate how powerful a honey is. The Unique Manuka Factor (UMF) ranges from 5 to 30, with experts recommending you choose one with a UMF of 10 or higher.

The New Zealand Honey Shop, with a store in London, sells lots of Comvita products, while >>



A beekeeper collects the new supplies of honey from the beehives

Left, top & above left: Australian Honey Products Far left & top left: Shutterstock



Money fact:

Honey is 25 per cent sweeter than normal sugar. You can generally use three quarters of a cup of honey to replace one cup of sugar in recipes.

Holland and Barrett now sells Medibee, Pure Gold and Spirits Bay brands.

There is a growing number of online companies supplying manuka honey in the UK, along with other bee products like propolis, a resin believed to have antibiotic properties that bees make to seal cracks in their hives, and royal jelly, secreted to feed young bees, and used in beauty products. Popular brands which use honey, propolis, beeswax or royal jelly include Huni, Living Nature and Pot of Gold.

In the last few years, Australia has also started to produce 'active' honey, made by bees feeding on jellybush, which is very similar to the manuka tree.

GLOBAL CRISIS

Sadly, just as recognition of honey's excellent properties is growing, the world's bee population is facing a major crisis. It began in the United States in 2006, with thousands of bees



Above Maureen Maxwell was interested in creating different tastes of honey

Below right Honey can vary in colour and be used in all kinds of gourmet products

abandoning hives suddenly and inexplicably, in what has been termed colony collapse disorder (CCD).

A similar phenomenon has been observed, if not to the same extent, in Europe and Asia. In the UK, as many as one in three bee colonies disappeared between the end of 2007 and the spring of 2008.

A parasitic mite called *Varroa destructor*, which feeds on the bees and weakens them, is a suspected factor, but experts have also implicated global warming and the use of pesticides.

Australia has so far managed to keep the *Varroa* out, but it was discovered in the North Island of New Zealand in 2000, and in the South Island in 2008. Kiwi beekeepers have had to start using miticides to protect against it, as the mite can completely destroy a hive within a year.

Jim Edwards, CEO of the National Beekeepers Association in New Zealand, says the problem is much

Most honey has an antibacterial quality, but manuka honey is in a completely different league

bigger than honey. "The damage caused by *Varroa* impacts not only on honey production, but on the intensive pollination services that beekeepers provide to horticulture and agriculture," he explains.

It is estimated that bees pollinate a third of the world's crops, which could result in a massive global food crisis if they die out – which is currently a very real danger. Let's hope a way to halt the honeybees' decline is found soon – we'll be in a very sticky situation without them. 🇦🇺



Further information

■ Arataki Honey is one of the largest beekeeping operations in the southern hemisphere.

www.aratakihoneyhb.co.nz

■ The Beechworth Honey Experience, Victoria, Australia, opened in 2008.

www.beechworthhoney.com.au

■ BeesOnline has an award-winning café and gives regular beekeeper talks and honey tasting tutorials.

www.beesonline.co.nz

■ Australian Honey Products, which sells honey under the Taverners, Cradle Mountain, and Bourke's brands, hopes to start distributing its products in the UK this year.

www.ozhoney.com.au

■ The New Zealand Honey Shop has a store in south London and sells online.

www.newzealandhoneyshop.co.uk

■ Kiwi Fruits: The New Zealand Shop has a store in

Covent Garden and also sells Manuka beauty products, honeycomb, and honeys, including Arataki online.

www.kiwifruitsnzshop.com

■ The Agrarian Kitchen in Tasmania offers cooking masterclasses. Forage in the garden for ingredients then learn how to use them. www.theagrariankitchen.com

■ The Honey Association in the UK has lots of information and recipes.

www.honeyassociation.com

honey fact:

A honey bee can fly at up to 15mph. Their buzzing noise is made by their wings beating at 11,400 times per minute



Rabbit braised with leatherwood honey, saffron and celery

SERVES 6

- » Pre-soak ½ teaspoon saffron in 1 tbsp warm water.
- » Heat 1 tbsp olive oil in a large heavy-based casserole dish. Add 1.4 kg rabbit (cut into eight pieces) and sauté over a medium heat for around 3–4 minutes, then put the rabbit aside.
- » Preheat the oven to 150°C/Gas Mark 2.
- » Add one thinly sliced onion to the casserole dish and cook over low heat until caramelized for around 8–10 minutes.
- » Add the saffron-infused water, honey, rabbit, 1 cup drained chickpeas and 750ml chicken stock. Increase the heat and bring to a simmer. Cover the casserole dish and transfer to the preheated oven. After 30 minutes add 250g celery, cut in 5cm lengths. Allow to cook for a further 25–30 minutes, or until the celery is tender.

■ **Recipe courtesy of Rodney Dunn, the Agrarian Kitchen, Tasmania**

Honey Ginger Pork

SERVES 4

- » Preheat oven to 190°C/ gas 5.
- » Combine 1 tsp sesame oil and 2 tsp sunflower oil in a large heavy base frying pan and put over a medium heat. When hot, add two 250g pork fillets and cook, turning until browned all over for about 4 minutes. Reserve the frying pan and any juices for later.
- » Put the pork in a medium sized oven-proof dish and transfer to the oven for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and cover with foil.
- » Meanwhile, combine ¼ cup oyster sauce, ½ cup strong honey (such as Beechworth's Bold), ¼ cup water, 1 tbsp finely grated ginger, 2 crushed cloves garlic and two star anise in a medium sized bowl. Pour the oyster sauce mixture over the frying pan juices, and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and allow to simmer for 3 minutes or until very thick, continually stirring.
- » Slice the pork and serve with the sauce, boiled rice, sliced shallots and steamed bok choy.

■ **Recipe courtesy of Beechworth Honey Experience, Victoria, Australia**

