

# The Honey-makers

Tiny Big Island residents  
do big things.

BY REBECCA PIKE



“If the bee disappeared off the surface  
of the globe then man would  
only have four years of life left.

No more bees, no more  
pollination, no more plants,  
no more animals,  
no more man.”

—*Albert Einstein*



WHOLE COMB HONEY,  
SHOWN HERE ATOP TRUF-  
FLED CHEESE AND  
FLATBREAD, IS TYPICALLY  
STRAIGHT FROM THE HIVE  
AND UNTOUCHED BY  
HUMAN HANDS.  
THE HONEYCOMB ITSELF  
IS EDIBLE.



#### SOBEK'S SWEET TOOTH

Ancient Egyptians worshipped a crocodile god, Sobek. Treats, including honey cakes, were fed to crocodiles in what is now the city of Medinet El-Fayoum.

#### HIPPOCRATIC HEALING

The father of medicine, Hippocrates, used honey to cure skin ailments and ulcers.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: (LEFT HAND PAGE) ©JONN/JOHNER IMAGES/CORBIS; (RIGHT HAND PAGE) ©LINNY MORRIS (THIS PAGE) ©BICHON/PHOTOCUSINE/CORBIS

Ancient Egyptians are thought to be the first to “keep” bees; that is, to create hospitable environments for a colony to develop, and to harvest its residents’ honey and wax with regularity. Cave paintings in Spain from 7,000 years ago depict men collecting from feral colonies. In not-at-all nearby China, Shang dynasty oracle inscriptions from 4,000 years later clearly show bees swarming.

As we humans evolved, so did our methods. Haphazardly poaching the sticky stuff from wild hives gave way to building small pots, keeping bees in hollow logs, or housing them in woven, termite mound-like structures called “skeps.” Today, most beekeepers use the Langstroth hive, which resembles a filing cabinet and was invented in 1852 by Reverend Lorenzo Langstroth.

Growing awareness of just how important these little beings are to life itself has resulted in the appeal of beekeeping in some unlikely places. The New York City Beekeepers Association is making news, as is a program called Bees Without Borders, whose mission is to bring beekeeping to impoverished communities and teach them how to operate this

lucrative business, which in turn helps all of the crops and plants nearby. In Hawaii, there is always something blooming for nectar-eaters, always a blossom to pollinate.

“It’s a beautiful, beautiful place,” says Wilson Reed of the setting for his Holuakoa Gardens & Café, about five minutes from Kona. Reed maintains that there is a big difference between local Big Island honey and others. “There are a lot of flavor nuances according to what the bees are pollinating,” which, on the Big Island, consists of about four types of trees, “but also in the way it’s produced.” Mass-produced honey, explains Reed, “It looks like honey, and may taste sort of like honey, but it’s not the same.” Experts in both beekeeping and culinary fields are certain that an artisan technique is paramount, as is the diet of the bees.

Of the island’s plants, those producing the most pollen are the ‘ōhi‘a lehua blossom (the island’s official flower, and one endemic to Hawaii), the *wilelaiki* (also known as Christmas Berry) and the macadamia nut blossom. Wendhi Grad, co-owner of Big Island Bees, doesn’t have a favorite; rather,

she uses differently sourced honeys for different purposes.

“For savory stuff, like salad dressing and roasting vegetables, the *wile[laiki]* is wonderful. The macadamia nut honey I like drizzled over yogurt. And for spreading on toast, it doesn’t get any better than the ‘ōhi‘a lehua, because it’s so creamy and thick.”

Run by fourth-generation beekeepers, Grad’s company has produced bulk honey on the Big Island since 1971 and has hives all over the island. “We move them to where there’s blooming, year round. They never have to be fed artificially.” She regrets to say that is not the case at large honey plants, where bees are fed sugar solutions during times of scarce blooming.

Richard Spiegel of Volcano Island Honey concurs about the artificial augmentation of bee diets in large honey manufacturers. Adding insult to injury, “Big bottlers blend together all these different honeys, and the result is uniform ... uniformly yucky.” Spiegel has seen staunch “honey-haters” do an about-face immediately upon tasting an artisan, single-sourced honey, so vast is the difference between the two.



# Mother earth wouldn't be herself

without the animals and insects that pollinate plants. Among these, responsible for one of life's very sweetest things, is the *Apis Mellifera* or "honey-bearing bee."

At Volcano Island, there is usually only one food source for the bees (although occasionally the colonies will subsist on lehua or macadamia nut flowers): "Pure kiawe," says Spiegel, "a very valuable tree to me." The kiawe nectar produces a honey that is white and naturally crystallized. With great care, this honey is made smooth, so smooth that one type of it is branded as "silk." With its creamy texture, it just begs to be spread on toast, and return visitors to specific hotels in the Islands know to ask for it by name. Paired with cheese, Volcano Island Honey has supported gold medals in competition. In a limited edition Vosges chocolate truffle, it is the sole filling.

"One dish I make with honey is a piz-zetta with roasted pear, gorgonzola and pine nuts," says Reed, of the applications of local honey. For his piz-zetta, he favors macadamia nut honey drizzled on the toppings. "I love it for its depth of flavor and its deep, dark amber color and smoothness. Whenever you have something salty and something sweet, you have the opportunity for great balance." Added to soups, he continues, honey levels out acids and rounds everything off with a gentle, sweet note, and his baker enjoys substituting honey for sugar in many recipes. To Reed, the importance of using local ingredients is paramount. "We depend on small farms and people who are making great products, and we value knowing those people personally."

Nobody knows this better than Richard Spiegel, a self-proclaimed "old hippie" who "will talk to anyone who'll listen" about the way he does business; the way that feels right to him. "These days it's called sustainability; environmental responsibility. ... We raise them, we manage them, harvest, extract, bottle, label and sell the product. It's an old way of doing things, and it works pretty well. ... You can run a business on values as

opposed to on profits and still make a profit. I watch nature and learn from it, as opposed to trying to dominate it, make it fit (into) a business mold."

"It's poetry," adds Whendi Grad. "I see the art of beekeeping as an intimate relationship with the bee and the natural world. It is the art of caretaking, drawing what one needs from the hive, but always leaving behind enough for the continuing welfare and future of the hive. This is a balance we should strive for in nature as well. They really work together, all playing different roles. The hive is an entity rather than the individual bee, and the hive has a life of its own."

"Honeybees have a society that is highly evolved at some levels, with sophisticated communication methods," continues Spiegel, who believes that people have a thing or two to learn from the bees. "There is no chief. There is no authority telling them what to do. Each bee responds according to what she observes and from the communication from the rest of the hive. The ability to respond—that's what responsibility is. I'm continually watching and continuing to learn what might be relevant to me as a human in order to evolve."

"Something I learned from bees is exactly what my grandmother tried to teach me all those years ago," says Spiegel. "She said: 'Save a penny.' Who saves a penny? Well, consider this. In a lifetime (only three to six weeks) a honeybee will gather one tablespoon of honey. That's it, yet a hive of bees can bring in two hundred pounds of honey in a season." It recalls the Hawaiian proverb that goes, "A'ohe hana nui ke alu 'ia." It means, "No task is too big when done together by all."

Look for artisan-crafted, organic Hawaiian honey from Big Island Bees and Volcano Island Honey at local shops throughout the islands. For personal tours of Volcano Island Honey with Richard Spiegel, call 808.775.1000.

## TELLING THE BEES

Across North America and Europe until around 1900, it was an obligation left to a specific heir to go and tell the bees their master had died. The rite has been the subject of many poems and serves as a reminder of the profound link between humans and bees ... even though we don't all see it today.

"So, bees, sing soft, and, bees, sing low,  
As over the honey-fields you sweep  
To the trees abloom and the flowers ablow  
Sing of grandfather fast asleep;  
And ever beneath these orchard trees  
Find cheer and shelter, gentle bees."

-Excerpt from "Telling the Bees"  
by Eugene Field