

VOLUSIA

Lagoon's mangroves among sources for trendy local honey

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Pulling over to stop at the top of New Smyrna Beach's south causeway, Sonny Yambor gestured toward shrub-covered islands stretching as far as the view through the windows on both sides of his crew-cab pickup.

"This is my farm," he said, with the Ponce de Leon Inlet Lighthouse in the distance to the north. "My bees are out there on every square inch."

Honey is Yambor's crop. And the acreage to which he was headed this day yields a distinct variety his bees make from nectar gleaned almost exclusively from black mangroves blooming in Mosquito Lagoon.

"It's the best-tasting honey in the world," said Yambor, who harvests, bottles and markets the black mangrove honey as part of his nursery business, Sun Splash of New Smyrna Beach.

The beekeeper may be a little biased, but there's no doubt honey gets discernible flavor, color, aroma and other culinary characteristics from the nectar gathered by bees from specific flowers. Black mangrove honey tastes different than orange blossom honey, which tastes different than palmetto honey and so on.

Blossom of origin is not the only determiner of flavor, either. Many people find raw honey — which is unfiltered and heated minimally, if at all, during packaging — to be more flavorful and complex than honey processed for the mass market.

Consumers appear to be coming to appreciate those distinctions more. Honey tasting — similar to wine tasting, right down to use of phrases such as "mouth feel" and "flavor notes" — has been popping up in classrooms, stores, county fairs and as a party theme. And with dozens of beekeepers like Yambor harvesting and selling raw honey in and near Volusia and Flagler counties, a diverse supply is readily available for the trying.

Hives placed strategically

Yambor's confidence in the taste of his black mangrove honey is backed up with a strategy. With the blessing of the state Department of Environmental Protection, every summer since 2012, he's placed his bees on islands in the Indian River from the inlet south to Oak Hill, where mangroves are just about the only plants to blossom in the sweltering heat.

"My concept is that it's two miles wide. A bee flies about a mile from the hive. If you put your hives right in the middle of the river, your honey will have more mangrove than anybody else's honey," he said.

The task isn't easy. The boxy hives — about 1,600 of them this year — are not light, even before the bees fill them with 50 pounds of honey or more. Most of the colony sites are accessible only by water, which means loading about half of the hives onto and off a boat rather than a truck. Yambor and his crew of six deliver them as soon as the mangroves start blooming, which was the last week of May this year. The bees, about 50,000 per colony, spend their summer days flitting from one mangrove blossom to another, spreading pollen to help the native vegetation thrive while collecting nectar. Crews begin to retrieve the hives in August, taking them to a commercial facility where the honey is extracted to be sold in 1-pound jars, 5-gallon buckets and 55-gallon drums.

Once a month or more, one of the buckets goes to Norwood's Eatery & Treehouse Bar in New Smyrna Beach.

"We go through five gallons — 58 to 59 pounds — every three to four weeks. We use it pretty much on anything you'd put honey on," plus in dressings and sauces, said chef Dennis Dolbow. "It tastes phenomenal compared to the stuff we were using before."

'Honey is not just honey'

Chefs aren't the only people taking notice of differences in types, and even batches, of honey. Honey tasting has become a thing.

"It is sort of like a wine tasting and people really enjoy it when they get to see the variety that's available," said longtime Southeast Volusia beekeeper, honey processor and retailer Doug McGinnis, who incorporates tasting opportunities into presentations about the industry. "I love to be able show people that honey is not just honey."

From around 1940 until late last year, the McGinnis family's Tropical Blossom Honey Co. bottled honey from Florida and Georgia beekeepers to be sold in its Edgewater store, shipped

throughout the U.S. and exported to more than 20 countries. Although the business was sold, the store was closed and processing was relocated to Valdosta, Georgia, McGinnis remains involved. He keeps bees at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, and plans to open a new Edgewater store at U.S. 1 and Park Avenue, the site of a fruit stand his parents opened when they moved to area from West Virginia more than 75 years ago.

Arguably, McGinnis has one of the planet's most well-developed palates for appreciating Florida varietal honeys, from classics such as orange blossom, palmetto and gallberry to sea grape, honeydew, tupelo and even the invasive Brazilian pepper. Light-colored honeys tend to be mild, while darker honeys are more complex. He groups them into three flavor types. Florals such as orange blossom are perhaps the most familiar. Earthy flavors dominate honeys made by the bees that pollinate South Florida's avocado crop. Herbal flavors, such as hints of anise or cinnamon, are apparent in tupelo honey, from the spring blooming of northwest Florida's gum trees, McGinnis said.

Honeys that don't have a single dominant floral source are labeled as wildflower honey, which can be quite diverse, McGinnis and Yambor said.

"Even around here are a wide variety of flavor notes. It's really quite interesting," McGinnis said.

Orlando-based beekeeper Chris Stalder teaches honey tasting classes at that city's Harry P. Leu Gardens, urging students to pay attention to sweetness, color, consistency and mouth feel. "We do a lot of sharing in the class. I ask people to describe the experience," he said.

The Volusia Beekeepers club offers honey tasting each year at the Volusia County Fair & Youth Show in November. Love Whole Foods has a honey tasting station in its Ormond Beach and Port Orange stores. Books and blog posts alike have been written on honey tastings and how to host them.

Pollen: Good or bad?

Yambor's Mosquito Lagoon black mangrove honey has a velvety, thin texture and floral scent. He also markets wildflower honey, extracted from hives that are deployed year-round on the 8-acre grounds of his nursery on Ingham Road in New Smyrna Beach. The wildflower honey's flavor profile varies depending on what's in bloom. Both honeys have a slightly tingly mouth feel at the end that can only mean one thing: there's pollen in there.

That's important to people who take a spoonful a day of raw, local honey on the theory that exposure will boost immunity to airborne allergens — a premise, for the record, that's widely panned by the mainstream medical community.

How and whether the presence of pollen affects the taste of raw honey depends on how much of it there is, said honey-tasting teacher Stalder. The National Honey Board, an industry-funded group overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, calls pollen an “accidental guest” that honey is better off without. All of the pollen has been filtered out of most honey on supermarket shelves because, according to the board's website, American consumers prefer it that way: brilliantly clear and liquid for a longer time.

“It's not at all like the honey out of the hive that's minimally processed by your local beekeeper,” Stalder said.

Where to find local honey

One-pound jars of Yambor's black mangrove and wildflower honey are sold at both Love Whole Foods locations for about \$8. The stores also carry several varieties from Honey Feast, a Groveland-based company that bottles raw honey in small batches, at a comparable price, said Love's general manager, Peggy Van Cleef.

“We sell a lot of locally sourced honey,” she said.

According to David Westervelt, an apiary inspector for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Volusia County has 87 registered beekeepers, six of them commercial, and Flagler County has 17, two of them commercial. Many more operate nearby, particularly west of Flagler County and east of Palatka.

By far, the majority of them keep bees for leisure or as a sideline, but “all of them pretty much produce honey and sell it,” Westervelt said.

Much of that hobbyist honey stays raw and for sale locally, but not in stores.

Florida law does not allow honey to be sold by a retailer, by mail or over the internet unless it's processed in a certified food establishment. Unlike commercial beekeepers such as Yambor, most smaller scale beekeepers do not have access to one. Without it, however, they can sell up to \$15,000 worth of their honey in person each year, in accordance with the state's cottage food law.

“It has to be sold belly-button-to-belly-button, from the beekeeper to the consumer,” said Stalder.

Volusia Beekeepers President Tim Blodgett said, “We always tell people a roadside stand or farmers market is the best place to find real honey.”

Number of beekeepers grows

With attention focused in recent years on threats to honey bee populations, one might fear beekeepers would be getting out of the business. The opposite is true, at least in Florida, according to apiary inspector Westervelt.

“Statewide, six years ago there were fewer than 1,000 beekeepers, four years ago there were about 1,200, and now there are about 4,200,” said Westervelt, whose primary task is to check colonies for the spread of the diseases that could hasten bees’ demise.

Many beekeepers are now propagating and selling bees to keep the population up and boost revenue, in addition to offering pollination services and products such as honey and beeswax, he explained.

“As long as the price of honey stays up, they can keep going,” he said.

It doesn't all stay here

Yambor is among the bee sellers. It was the logical next step in an apiary adventure that sprouted from a vegetable plot he planted in 2008 to make his landscape-nursery business and his household more recession-proof.

“I planted the garden to make sure we’d be able to eat,” he recalled.

Soon, he began selling the fresh produce; in 2010, he added bees for pollination. As the garden grew and the honey flowed, he was struck by the thought that the mangroves in the lagoon — still recovering from a devastating freeze decades before — could use a little help from his friends. He approached environmental officials for the state, which owns many of the sites on which he places hives, for permission.

Last year, the effort yielded 80,000 pounds of black mangrove honey.

In a business reality that could be called bittersweet, about 75 percent of it was destined to stay neither raw nor local. It was packed into 55-gallon drums containing about 650 pounds apiece and shipped to major honey houses at the going rate of about \$2 a pound.

“Each year, I’m keeping more here and selling less in bulk,” Yambor said.