

VOGUE

As Beekeeping Gets Harder, Honey Vintages Come Into View

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Carmel Valley Ranch

Photo: Courtesy of Carmel Valley Ranch

Behind the manicured beds of chrysanthemums and towering sunflowers at Carmel Valley Ranch, a fenced-in apiary that houses more than 60,000 Italian bees. John Russo, the beekeeper, manages both this enormous set of hives and the private apiary of owner John Pritzker. The resort is one of the few places in the world that harvests honey and serves it in vintages exclusively for the Valley Kitchen restaurant. Russo, like many professional beekeepers, harvests honey in two ways: The first is comb honey, which is gently cut from the hive as a raw, natural gesture (with the bees removed, of course!), and served with cheeses. “This is probably the oldest method for enjoying honey. There is pictorial evidence from Spider Cave, near Valencia, Spain that this method of collection was done as far back as 6,000 to 8,000 years,” he says. The other method, “strained” honey, is done by removing the frames and gently brushing the bees back into the hive; the frames are then uncapped to expose honey

under the wax seals, and a centrifuge extractor spins the honey out. “This is a traditional method in the U.S. for producing strained honey since about the late 1800s,” Russo explains.



Beekeeping at Carmel Valley Ranch
Photo: Ed Foley / Courtesy of Carmel Valley Ranch

As bees have been dying in droves, beekeepers and consumers alike are realizing the sanctity and looming scarcity of this precious amber liquid, a food that never goes bad. “Honey, whether it is produced right now or found in containers from thousands of years ago, will retain its flavor,” says Will Merrill, owner and “chief bee wrangler” at Orchard Lane Apiary in Columbus, Ohio. Once the bees put their signature wax capping on the honey, he says, it will not spoil.

Its self-preserving nature makes honey ripe for later enjoyment. And while a honey “vintage” might not change with age, it will represent a certain period of time—and a field of flowers that was alive then. Honey vintages are not oaked or barreled as wine is; the flavor depends solely on the way the honey was formed during a certain season. In essence, no two honey vintages are alike because the floral bouquet composition changes season by season.

Andrew Cote, who keeps six hives buzzing with over 450,000 bees on the rooftop of the Hilton Midtown in New York City says that vintages produced from the crop of flowers found in Central Park (where the bees go to get food) are rich and quite unique.

During spring, Cote says, the vintage will most likely be light in color and heavily loaded with linden due to the high density of such trees in the city. In the fall, Japanese knotweed dominates the taste and color of the honey, which veers towards a dense amber hue.

Like experienced winemakers, beekeepers still play a role in the taste of their product. When they remove the honey from the comb, they need to separate the dark and light nectar, and use their judgement in determining this ratio. Artisanal honey comes with health benefits, too. "It is better for your immune system to consume local honey," says Daphne Blackmer, head gardener at Round Pond Vineyard in Napa Valley. Round Pond is known for its distinctive olive mill as well as grape vines. Blackmer, who has been with the vineyard for seven years, harvests honey twice yearly and uses these "vintages" as wine pairings, and for the owner's family. "We do keep track of what year the honey was harvested," she says.

As it becomes harder to sustain bees, the keepers realize that preserving their hard-earned jars is vital. The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel on the beautiful Kohala coast in Kamuela, Hawaii, for instance, is in the beginning stages of their honey program but intends to establish vintages as it understands that each harvest will always be unique. The resort currently has sample containers from this year's harvests that show the range in color and diversity in flavor profiles based on the bloom. The hotel plans create a tasting room concept in the future. Also in the works? A mead wine amenity for honeymooners so the happy couple can take home a proper vintage from the year of their wedding.