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How Sweet It Is

The buzz on local honey

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Honey — thick and golden — was the world's first sweetener. So prized was this treasure that the ancients designated honey as food of the gods, and it loomed large in the mythology of many cultures, especially for the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Hindus and Maya.

Scholars believe the nomadic peoples of Central Asia introduced

the world to honey at least 10,000 years ago. Eva Crane, author of "The Archaeology of Beekeeping," tells of a cave painting from the Mesolithic era discovered in Valencia, Spain. The painting shows "two female honey hunters collecting honey and honeycomb from a wild bee nest. The two women are depicted in the nude, carrying baskets, and using a long wobbly ladder in order to reach the wild nest."

Egyptian tomb reliefs dating back to the 3rd millennium B.C. illustrate men collecting honey by smoking bees from their hives, thus making them less aggressive. This ancient method is still in use today.

Despite the somewhat harrowing process of gathering honey, it was deemed well worth the trouble. Not only did honey taste delicious, but, due to its naturally occurring yeast, it fermented easily and produced a mildly intoxicating liquid: honey ale known as mead.







Until the Middle Ages, honey was the predominant sweetener in much of the world. In England, it did not lose its hold until the 16th century when the monasteries were dissolved. The monks kept bees primarily for their wax, used for making votive candles. Honey was a useful commercial by-product.

Honeybees (of the genus *Apis*) produce the honey we eat. Most other bees produce honey with undesirable qualities. The bees gather nectar from flowers, bring it back to the hive and turn it into honey by a process of regurgitation. It's stored as a primary food source for the hive in wax honeycombs.

Culinary uses of honey are boundless. It is used in baking, cooking and as a spread, and it's an integral ingredient in many sauces and dressings. Honey is commonly added to tea and some commercial beverages. But honey's uses extend beyond the kitchen. Throughout the ages, various health benefits have been attributed to honey, although the science has been sketchy at best.

According to food scientist Shirley Corriher, "honey not only adds a pleasant flavor and sweetness to bread, but keeps baked products moist as well." That said, she found that some honeys kill yeast, ruining the bread. Corriher discovered that honey "has been used as a pharmaceutical for hundreds of



years. In times before refrigeration ... honey killed many things that grew on spoiling food. Some honeys will even kill staph." With its exceptional antibacterial as well as soothing properties, honey's use in relieving a sore throat makes sense. Honey is also touted as a cure for allergies and stomach ailments, and is used topically for wounds including burns.

Raw honey — honey as it exists in the hive — is said to have remarkable curative powers. It is generally not heated, though it may be "minimally processed." Excessive heat reduces the nutritive and possibly curative value of honey. Raw honey is unfiltered and contains bee pollen, propolis, spores,

and sometimes bits of wax. Allergy sufferers seek out local raw honey, as the pollen is said by many to reduce hay fever.

Although honey continues to be praised for its health benefits, note this word of caution. Some honey contains dormant endospores of the bacterium *clostridium botulinum*, which can be dangerous, even life-threatening, to infants, according to the National Honey Board. Because the endospores can transform into toxin-producing bacteria in immature intestinal tracts, never feed honey to children younger than 1 year.

San Antonio is fortunate to have local honey producers to supply their ambrosial wares. Honeys differ in flavor according to the particular flowers visited by the bees, and methods used by beekeepers differ as well.

If you've ever tasted lavender honey, you'll want to discover Imagine Lavender Farm and its exquisite Lavender Infused Honey. Patience Diaz heads up the operations at Imagine Lavender, located in the Sabinal Canyonlands in the Texas Hill Country. Their estate-grown culinary lavender is infused with locally produced wildflower raw honey.

Diaz says the farm uses honey collected by two beekeepers from San Antonio who rotate their hives in spring to the farm when the lavender is blooming, thus "going back to old-fashioned, natural beekeeping practices." The honey comes from Atascosa, Bexar, Medina and Bandera counties and includes clover fields off Highway 151 at Loop 410.

Diaz notes that much research is in progress regarding the health benefits of honey, and she believes eating local honey is of great benefit to the immune system. Research into lavender



Keeping the passion

Mark and Thien Gretchen own and operate Gretchen Bee Ranch in Seguin, Texas. Mark Gretchen worked as a librarian for 30 years, but his passion was beekeeping. Three years ago, he retired and began beekeeping full time.

Gretchen's first adventures in beekeeping began in Burnet County in 1982, when he and his uncle built equipment and captured swarms of bees to add to their stock. In 1984, he joined Clifford Apiaries, a commercial outfit that bred and sold queen bees to beekeepers throughout North America. He admits, "A novice, I was known for getting stung more than the others — once 26 times from a single hive that was known for its gentle behavior."

Today, he's a pro. His bees gather pol-

len in Guadalupe and Gonzales counties, using three yards — Gonzales Yard, the Farm Yard and a yard near Elm Creek with 10-15 hives per yard. He's in the process of splitting the hives and adding more locations. Gretchen's methods differ from many other beekeepers, most of whom move their hives around for the bees to gather different pollens, which in turn yield different tasting honeys. Gretchen prefers to keep his hives isolated in permanent fields. He believes this helps him to keep the bees healthy, and less prone to colony collapse disorder or mites.

In the Elm Creek Yard in Guadalupe County, the bees feast on nectar from mesquite, wildflowers, bee brush, huajilla and agarita. With this nectar, the honey they produce is sweet with a light, distinctive flavor. He says last year, when the wildflowers were "so amazing," the nectar came predominantly from these, plus mesquite, and "it gave the honey a fantas-

tic taste." His favorite to date? Honey from the yaupon holly in Gonzales. Gretchen's honey is raw, not overheated or overfiltered. "Just the way it comes from the hives" he says. "This preserves the pollen grains, and the enzymes are still intact."

The Gretchens say they both "used to be miserable with their allergies." Now that they are eating honey every day, Mark reports that although they're not cured, they're misery-free. They attribute their improvement to the pollen in the honey.

Gretchen Bee Ranch honey is used in the Texas Honey cookie recipe at Lily's Cookies in San Antonio. During the summer, when the honey becomes available, and while supplies last, you can also pick up a supply of the honey (and some cookies!) at Lily's at 2716 McCullough. They also sell Gretchen's beeswax candles and their honeycomb honey.

The Gretchens' mission is "not only to produce great honey, but also to replenish the bees that have vanished from our



Pictured pages 38-40: Gretchen Bee Ranch, Seguin

is also under way, exploring its antiseptic and antiviral properties.

With summer here, what could be more inviting than a dish of Lavender Honey Ice Cream? Here's a recipe you'll want to try.



Lavender Honey Ice Cream

- 1 cup half and half
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 7 egg yolks
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Imagine Farms Lavender Honey

Combine the half and half and cream in a heavy saucepan; heat to just below boiling and remove from the stovetop and let cool slightly. Meanwhile, beat

the egg yolks in a bowl until frothy. Whisking continuously, slowly pour half of the cream mixture into the egg yolks. Pour that mixture back into the saucepan and heat on low, whisking constantly, for about five minutes. Pour the mixture through a fine meshed sieve into a bowl and whisk in the honey. Chill thoroughly; then freeze in an ice cream maker according to manufacturer's directions. Makes 4-5 servings.

Courtesy Imagine Farms





area," noting that about 30 percent of our diet depends on pollination from bees. The couple is offering folks with 10-15 acres of land in or near Guadalupe County the opportunity to host some of Gretchen's bees on their property, which earns the hosts free pollination for their crops or gardens and a free quart of honey per year for each hive. For more information, visit www.gretchenbeer-anch.com.

**Additional Recipes,
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Texas Hot Wings

2½ pounds chicken drumettes or wings
1 cup barbecue sauce
1½ cups chunky salsa
2 tablespoons Gretchen Bee Ranch honey
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 teaspoon hot sauce
¼ teaspoon garlic powder
Fresh ground black pepper, to taste

Place chicken in a large nonstick skillet. Mix remaining ingredients; pour over chicken and coat each piece well. Bring to a low simmer, cover, and simmer 30 minutes, or until chicken is cooked through. Toss or turn occasionally to cook evenly. Serve with blue cheese dressing and raw vegetables, or on top of steamed jasmine rice.

Courtesy Gretchen Bee Ranch

Fruit and Honey Smoothie

1 banana
6-8 fresh strawberries
6-8 raspberries
6-8 blackberries or blueberries
¼ cup orange juice
3-4 tablespoons Gretchen Bee Ranch Honey, any variety
1½ cups plain yogurt (or vanilla if preferred)
1 cup peaches (fresh, preserved or frozen)
Ice, to taste (Less ice makes a smoother, creamier texture; more yields a cold, snow cone texture.)
2 teaspoons wheat germ (optional)

Place ingredients in blender in the order listed. This allows for even and thorough blending. Contents should fill the blender to the top but should allow the lid to close easily and securely. Blend contents for about 2 minutes or until desired consistency. Fills 3-4 medium-size tumblers.

Courtesy Gretchen Bee Ranch

Additional Recipes at sataste.com