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Why raw local honey?

A natural sweetener we should eat more often

By Joe Hansen
May 20, 2010

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Humans have always coveted honey. We stole it from wild bees before we learned to nurture *Apis mellifera* in home-built hives. And we've always been willing to pay for our harvest with a few bee stings.

Much of honey's subtle flavors and nutritional value are lost, however, when it's heated and filtered as part of the modern process of food preparation and transport. The best way to eat honey is the way our ancestors did: directly from the hive, or as close to it as possible. Eating raw local honey also supports a more environmentally friendly agricultural model.

Here are eight things you should know about eating local raw honey.

Raw honey is a natural alternative to processed sweeteners like high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).

Many consumers are now seeking ways to avoid HFCS and other overly processed sweeteners. Some worry about the chemical processing involved in making HFCS. Others dislike the corn monoculture behind HFCS. Still others just prefer natural foods for health reasons.



Raw honey is not heated beyond ambient temperatures that could occur in a hive.

Honey is nature's own sweetener, created by bees from the pollen and nectar of flowering plants. Typically, about 70 percent of honey is a combination of fructose and glucose, with a smattering of maltose, sucrose, and other sugars mixed in.

Raw honey contains a cocktail of healthy ingredients.

Honey is primarily a collection of simple carbohydrates, but it also contains (albeit in small doses) an assortment of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and amino acids.

An [ongoing study at the University of Illinois](#) is currently fleshing out the antioxidant properties of honey, but it is known that honey has a profile

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containing polyphenols, which act as antioxidants.

Because of its perceived antibacterial qualities, traditional cultures have long used honey to dress wounds. According to Peter Molan, a researcher at University of Waikato, New Zealand, the benefits are real: He's noted in his research **strong anecdotal evidence honey can stimulate the regrowth of tissue** involved in healing and act as an anti-inflammatory agent.

Many of the health benefits of honey are lost when it is filtered and heated above ambient temperatures.

Modern food-processing techniques often involve filtering honey for clarity and superheating it to avoid crystallization and extend its shelf life. These processes can **dilute much of the nutritional and health value** of honey, however. Filtering might remove minerals, for example, and superheating honey partially destroys its vitamins, nutrients, and enzymes.

The definition of raw honey is debatable, but generally it means honey that is strained (run through a screen to remove large particulate matter like chunks of beeswax) rather than fine-filtered, and not heated above ambient temperatures that could occur within the hive (generally nothing greater than 100 degrees).

Fresh, locally produced raw honey has unique flavors.

Another casualty of industrial honey production is taste. Much of the honey found in stores is a mixture of many different kinds of honey, with much of its uniqueness lost in the process of filtering, heating, and mixing.

Honey is the result of the pollen and nectar gathered in a certain locale during a certain season, which can lead to delicious results; Pacific Northwest red clover and blackberry varieties are good examples. Much of this distinctive flavor is lost during the industrial packing and mixing processes, though, and the result is a generic sweetener where there once was a unique flavor.

The jury's still out on honey's allergy-fighting properties.

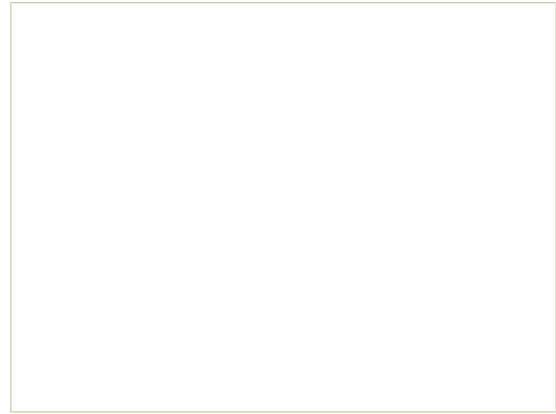
Because local raw honey contains minute particles of pollen from local plants, some people believe that ingesting local raw honey helps build up immunity to the pollen, alleviating springtime allergies. But **scientific studies on the topic have proven inconclusive.**

Buying local honey supports the beekeeping industry, an integral part of agriculture currently facing a host of challenges.

More than a decade ago, the USDA estimated that honey bees accounted for **80 percent of insect pollination in the country**, giving an added value of \$14.6 billion annually to

American crops.

But beekeeping is becoming increasingly difficult, as commercial beekeepers must spend hefty sums on treatments for parasites and infectious disease. One way beekeepers pay for these expenses is by finding lucrative retail outlets for high-quality honey.



Locally produced honey has unique flavors.

If you don't know where your honey is coming from, chances are it's imported.

The majority of honey sold in the U.S. is now imported from four major sources: Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and China. This is a shift from past decades, when most of the honey sold in the U.S. was produced domestically.

Imported honey is much cheaper than home-grown honey, undercutting American producers. In 2009, imported honey from the above four countries sold for an average of \$1.28 per pound, well below the Stateside cost of production.

Buying local honey is better for the environment.

The growing popularity of local-food movements is due in part to the realization that shipping produce around the globe using fossil fuels is an irresponsible way to live. Honey is no exception, and the math is simple: Buying local honey causes less pollution and saves resources.

But there's another side to the equation as well. As cheap imported honey steadily shoves American beekeepers out of the market, those beekeepers are forced to seek other methods for making a living. The primary alternative thus far is commercial pollination, in which beehives are shipped hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to pollinate monocrop farms so massive and unnatural that wild pollinators can't live there. Commercial pollination itself adds to the carbon footprint of American agriculture, and it's also notoriously hard on bees, which are the pollination foundation of North American ecosystems.

A better market for high-quality local honey — along with other hive products, such as beeswax candles and royal jelly — would allow beekeepers to veer away from the industrial model of commercial pollination.

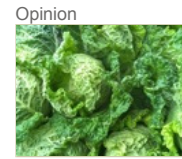
Joe Hansen is a commercial beekeeper for the family-owned Foothills Honey Company in Colton, Oregon.



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1. by Laura Weldon on May 26, 2010 at 11:26 AM PDT

Wonderful piece, thank you Joe.

Consumer awareness is the powerhouse pushing change. Let's hope greater awareness of commercial honey benefits local beekeepers. Consumers are learning what is sold as "honey" isn't always 100% honey (cheap imports have been found to contain packers syrup). They're finding out cheap imported honey isn't always free of medications and chemicals banned in the U.S. (as with recent contaminated honey funneled from China through other countries to the U.S.). And they're discovering that honey harvested here can be blended with imported honey.

As with the purchase of any sustainable, local foods it's best to know your source. Befriend a beekeeper!



2. by Carrie Oliver on Jun 3, 2010 at 8:19 AM PDT

Does raw honey contain any potential food safety concerns? How does one go about finding it (I'm nowhere near a farmers' market). Thanks!

As for imports, I was befuddled to have recently brought home an organic honey only to discover it was from Australia. Surely there are people in Ontario and upstate NY who make honey. ps It wasn't cheap by any stretch.



3. by Susan on Jun 9, 2010 at 4:40 PM PDT

Thank you for this article! I knew someone who had a decubitus and instead of a cream from their Dr., they applied Honey and Egg Whites, it healed very quickly and no antibiotic was needed as no infection ensued. My daughter has Crohns' Disease and we are trying a Tablespoon twice a day and we are hoping that it will help to minimize it or heal her.



4. by Betty Frame on Jun 10, 2010 at 7:55 AM PDT

Great article, Responding to #2 comment.

We have our own bees, and even have our hives named..great fun, yummy rewards :-)
HOWEVER there is something everyone needs to be aware of. check out the article Infant botulism: How can it be prevented? - MayoClinic.com

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