

I Am THE
**FOOD
 ON YOUR
 PLATE**

Honey

A Sweetener That's the Bee's Knees

BY *Kate Lowenstein*
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ONE SPRING DAY thankfully not too long from now, once the flowers have begun to open, a bee will hover and zip through your yard and dive-bomb your picnic table. While you're thinking about avoiding a sting, that bee is focused on something else entirely: me.

A honeybee has about six weeks to live. Today, like most days, her task is to fly as many as three miles from home, stick her long, strawlike tongue into a hundred or so flowers, slurp up tiny droplets of sweet, watery nectar, and store it in a stomachlike organ called a honey sac. When the bee has had her fill, she'll fly home, her special, enzyme-filled belly already breaking the nectar down into glucose and fructose. So begins the minor miracle of nature that leads to me.

Once at the hive, the bee will deposit her haul into the mouth of one of her coworkers, who will relay it to another, and so on for about 20 minutes, until the mixture is ready to be placed into the beautifully geometric comb. Then she and her 50,000 or so hive mates will hover and buzz in the dark all night, every night, flapping their wings to create the hot, breezy conditions needed to dehydrate the watery mixture. Several sunrises later, they will seal me off in a golden cell of beeswax, my slow-flowing, viscous, 18 percent water solution now irrevocably complete.

In her lifetime, our bee may visit

4,000 flowers, and yet all her gathered nectar will produce only one twelfth of a teaspoon of me. Given the daunting math, the hive has to muster all its forces to produce enough of me to feed itself. (To wit, in 2010, Brooklyn

HONEY BUTTER, HOMEMADE

AS A SPREAD Using an electric mixer or a rubber spatula, thoroughly combine 8 tablespoons softened unsalted butter with 4 tablespoons honey. Season with salt and refrigerate. Return to room temperature and spread on muffins, toast, pancakes—you name it.

AS A SAUCE In a large skillet with sloped sides, melt 6 tablespoons unsalted butter with 4 tablespoons honey over medium heat, stirring to combine. Season with salt and drizzle over popcorn, potato chips, toast, waffles, fried chicken, etc.

FLAVORS TO ADD TO EITHER Cinnamon, nutmeg, or ground ginger; woody herbs like minced rosemary or thyme; citrus zests; rose water or orange-flower water; or extracts like vanilla or almond.



beekeepers opened their hives to find a garish, bright-red honey that tasted like too-sweet cough syrup. The mystery persisted for months until they realized that their bees had been flying past the flowers and straight to a local maraschino cherry factory as a shortcut to their sweet fix.)

The process that produces me may have helped form you too. Scientists believe that wild hives full of honey provided the calories that early humans like *Homo erectus*, walking in Africa, needed to develop their brains into those of modern humans. That puts me in a class with fire, tool use, and hunting as a key ingredient in human evolution. The other sweeteners humans avail themselves of—made from sap, agave nectar, and sugar cane juice—all require boiling a sweet liquid down into a syrup or a granulated sugar, a process that was discovered much later.

With time, those evolved brains learned to domesticate bees to produce me in a farmed setting. Today's beekeepers support large-scale industrial farms, which would be unable to grow their crops without hiring traveling groups of bees to come pollinate their vast, single-species fields.

The bees will endlessly fill the towers of combs stacked onto their hives by the beekeeper, who then collects the extra honey for your consumption while still leaving the bees all they need to eat.

Today, the average American

consumes nearly a pound and a half of honey every year, using it to sweeten tea and confections and drizzle on toast. If I do say so myself, I am a timeless treasure. Literally—I never go bad. Samples nearly 3,000 years old found in the Egyptian pyramids are as edible as the day they were entombed. Through some combination of low water content, high pH, and the natural presence of hydrogen peroxide within me, I am highly antimicrobial and therefore impervious to spoiling. My antimicrobial nature also makes me an excellent salve for chronic wounds, keeping infection out while holding in the moisture that skin needs to heal.

Alas, my ubiquity is not guaranteed: U.S. beekeepers lose about 40 percent of their hives annually to colony collapse disorder. The problem lies in the growth of industrial agriculture and pesticide use, as well as urban sprawl and changes in weather patterns, all of which reduce the number of flowers bees have to visit. If the bees continue to die apace, almonds, apples, and peaches (along with every other crop

that relies on their pollination) will become scarcer and pricier. As will I.

Given that, and the work it takes to make me, it's not surprising that I am perhaps your supermarket's most frequently adulterated food, laced with cheap sugar syrup or corn syrup to stretch the supply. In 2010, the largest case of food fraud in American history was busted when authorities discovered \$80 million in smuggled, tainted Chinese honey. That is among the reasons I hope you buy domestic honey, especially from local beekeepers.

I'd also appreciate your letting your own garden grow just a little wild and holding off from frequent mowing and herbicide spray. My future depends on all of us fostering spring and summer's wild blossoms, thus helping the bees, who give so much—to you, to me—without ever asking for anything in return. 

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In the Beginning ...

From 1952 to 1964, you had to provide your own potato for Mr. Potato head.

The original jukeboxes came with earphones.

Only one person could listen at a time.

Barbie was released in 1959 but didn't look forward until 1971.

Tennis balls were once stuffed with human hair.