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Shelf Life chooses the best Ontario honey for your money

By A. Brouwer and A. Wilson, Special to National Post

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Question: Bee populations need to be restored - where can we start? Answer: Let's treasure the fruits of the hive.

Many factors have produced a perfect storm of hazards for honeybees both wild and domestic. Among them: pesticides; parasites; habitat destruction; short-sighted agricultural management; and climate change. The terror of the honeybee - i.e., the breezes and the soil and the blossoms and the honeycombs and the whole sunny circulatory system of the field - has been rendered shrunken and increasingly toxic by human exploitation, everywhere. The warning drums cannot be banged loudly enough, because the fate of our pollen distributors is the fate of the commons: if they go, we go.

But Shelf Life hasn't come to bury the buzz business but to praise it. Most people are probably unaware that every temperate Canadian region offers a dazzling range of luminous, astonishing honeys. Though we pride ourselves on matters locavore, Shelf Life had little idea. Granted, over the years we had accumulated a jumble of honey facts - for example, that Canada is the world's sixth largest producer of honey, with three-quarters of our production coming from the Prairies; that nectar-gathering season is from March to October; that early-spring honey is generally light coloured and mild, while dark honey is produced later and has a stronger taste. But no one told us that a collection of artisanal elixirs from a single province can blow the mind beautifully - e.g. that liquid gold from Omeme is way different than the silky delights of the Niagara Peninsula.

Accordingly, this taste test departs from Shelf Life's usual method; it's not so much a cage match between winners and losers but a sensual pilgrimage up the honey Nile, right here in the big smoke (where, surprisingly, honey is flourishing).

Some tasting notes: single-source honeys vary across the country. For example, fireweed honey is most prevalent in British Columbia, where the plant springs up after forest fires; it has little or no profile in Ontario. Wildflower honey is the apiarist's term for mixed nectar sources. Goldenrod (key flavours: floral, vegetal, woody); clover (animal, vegetal, floral); blueberry (fruit, floral, citrus); and buckwheat honeys (earthy, musty, animal) are all plentiful in Ontario (buckwheat, by the way, is not a wheat, or even a grass; it's related to rhubarb). Shelf Life has heard rumours of Ontario purple loosestrife honey, but it remains the jar that got away.

The more we taste honey - the more opportunities we have to savour this elemental, visceral pleasure - the more it connects us to something wild. Honey isn't just a food, it's a gift. Go out and buy some good quality Ontario honey today, and remember this: When the bees arrive back at the hive, and hang their sacs of nectar on the tops of the honeycombs, the members of the colony gather around and hover, flapping their wings to produce a continuous breeze. This reduces the nectar's water content, and transforms it into honey. The bees have two sets of wings for the task, and the process takes time. Honey is born from the patient action of millions of tiny wings. Magic and respect.

Pondering the fate of the female honeybee - who produces a half teaspoon of honey in a lifetime - are this week's expert judges: **Jamie Drummond**, editor, Good Food Revolution¹; chef and food writer **Voula Halliday**, a regular on CBC's *Steven and Chris* show; and journalist, cookbook author and blogger (EatLocallyBlogGlobally.com) **Sarah B. Hood**, all in Toronto. Space limitations prevent us from evaluating every product in a given category; entries reflect the luck of the draw. Items are blind taste tested and awarded between zero and five stars. Products in the test are raw and unpasteurized.

The results: It's all good. Having said that, the Dutchman from Carlisle, Ontario makes sublime honing.



Brand 1: Heavenly Honey Country Garden Honey 500g
foodiepages.ca²,
heavenlyhoney.ca

Jamie The flavour really explodes on the palate - in a dainty way. Brand 1 is a delicate honey with tones that remind me of herbal tea: mint and chamomile. It is very pale, with an almost chewy consistency. It's hard to explain but it leaves me with a feeling of goodness and wholesomeness. ★★ ★ ½
Voula To me it smells like white flowers and mint, but it tastes more like Chinese pear and warm canteloupe. Brand 1 has a gluey-chewy texture. I know what Jamie means about its liveliness - there's something effervescent in the taste. Just now when I caught the aroma again, there's something really nice in there. ★★★★★
Sarah Wouldn't this spoonful taste fantastic on a bran muffin? This is an energetic, flowery honey, with hints of chive blossom and jasmine tea. Brand 1 has a wonderful fresh vital quality, like the bees were going. 'We're ready! We're ready! Hurry up!' ★★★★★ ½

Total: 14 stars



Brand 2: Clovermead Goldenrod Honey 500g
clovermead.com

Jamie The viscosity is interesting - it is so thick it almost won't budge. It's the colour of apple juice and sticks a bit on the back of my palate. It's got a floral taste: dandelions, daisies, and sunflowers. This is a good serviceable honey. ★★ ★ ½
Voula This is a crowd-pleaser - it has some appealing qualities. It has a sweet musty wine smell, and I'm tasting dandelions and grape skins. It's thick and oily with a lovely colour like dried apricots. ★★★★★
Sarah It definitely tastes floral. I'm thinking sunflowers, daisies and dandelions, with maybe a hint of citrus. It's not too sweet, and I agree with Jamie that there's an aftereffect at the back of the throat, a drop of bitterness. My overall impression is of tangy meadow flowers. Great with toast and butter! ★★★★★

Total: 8.5 stars



Brand 3: Nude Bee Honey Co. Pumpkin Honey 330g
nudebee.ca⁵

Jamie It looks like peach tea and it races off the spoon - it's liquid and drippy. I find Brand 3 quite neutral and accessible. Kids might like it; it's not too extreme. Are you familiar with old-fashioned golden syrup - with the picture of the dead lion and the honeybees on the tin? Brand 3 tastes like that. ★★ ★ ½
Voula Yes, to me it's entry level honey. It's not complex but it works. I would eat it the way they snack on maple syrup in Quebec - just put a dollop on warm soft white bread. Brand 3 smells a little bit like roses, and has a wet texture. ★★ ★ ½
Sarah When I first tasted Brand 3 I caught a touch of something like McIntosh's toffee, with a grain of cinnamon. It has a flowing texture, with clover and baby powder accents on the nose. ★★★★★

Total: 10 stars



Brand 4: Wild Country Buckwheat Honey 500g
widely available, more information here

Jamie This has a dark amber colour, which makes me think it might be one of the stronger varieties such as buckwheat. And - wow! - this has an animal aroma, mixed with malt and straw and cod liver oil capsules. Brand 4 smells like the big cat house at the zoo. The taste isn't for everybody but I really like it. ★★★★★
Voula Brand Four is surprising; initially it smelled like a barn stall - in a good way. Then I picked up a bit of wintergreen and finally it finished like the taste of old socks. I'd love to find uses for this honey - I'll start by trying it on a spinach and blue cheese salad. ★★ ★ ½
Sarah Hmmmm ... for me this molasses-coloured and thick honey is reminiscent of locker rooms - new ones, not old ones. Gym bags and gingerbread. There is something pleasantly sweaty and grown-up about Brand 4. ★★ ★ ½

Total: 11 stars



Brand Five: Rosewood Estates Wildflower Honey \$3.50g
available at the Chapters Indigo Bookstore across Canada, more retail outlets here

Jamie I like the graininess and the chewiness. The taste is a little undistinguished. The most interesting thing about it is the smell, which is faintly barnyardy. Just a wee whiff. Compared to the jungle pavilion odour of the previous honey, Brand 5 is like a petting zoo. ★ ½
Voula To me it smells like church candles. It tastes like cooked-down cloves and beeswax. It's very sweet. I'm not sure how this one stands up to the others. ★★
Sarah Brand 5's texture is glue-y and pollen-y, and it smells like beeswax and sunflowers. There's a high sweet top note in the taste; a little goaty, a little cheesy. Like a greasy chamois or leather work gloves. ★★ ★

TOTAL: 6.5 stars



Brand 6: Burke's Clover Honey 500g
*widely available; more information here*⁶

Jamie Brand 6 would be good for drizzling on cheese. It's got the right texture, and a broad range of flavour notes. It's nice and bright, with an aroma like a baby's bum. ★★ ★
Voula I love the amber colour, but check out the sweetness, which is nice but vanishes very quickly. There's an unexpected dairy thing going on, kind of lactic, kind of reflux-y. Then you've got a very different smell, which is like pine forest. I have to think some more about this one. ★★
Sarah Exactly - some mixed impressions of Brand 6. It's got a pinky-gold appearance and the texture is like corn syrup. It smells like a cedar swamp. There's a cheesy aspect - maybe yogurt? ★★ ★

Total: 8 stars



Brand 7: Dutchman's Gold Wildflower Honey 500g
*widely available in health and fine food stores in Ontario, order online*⁹

Jamie The texture is smooth and sophisticated, with an aroma of hay, cedar, and sandalwood. Brand 7 reminds me of the cornfields outside the village in Scotland where I grew up. There's something regal here, and refined. A better class of bees! ★★★★★
Voula That's what I love about honey - it can take your memory back; it's an exquisite quality. Brand 7 has a glowing, foggy amber appearance, and it smells like ... a men's clothing shop. Like a mixture of men's cologne and sandalwood. It lingers timelessly and finishes beautifully, with just the right amount of sweetness. ★★★★★
Sarah It smells like cedar, waxed wood, and frankincense, like peeking into an old chest. It looks like whisky. Brand 7 is soothing - if you had a sore throat this would be the one to choose. It's a magic honey that restores you and takes you back to your childhood. ★★★★★

Total: 15 stars (WINNER)



Brand 8: Long Point Honey Co. Wild Summer Solstice Honey 250g
available from longpointhoney.ca

Jamie Totally flowery. For me this is the most floral of all eight honeys, with a layer of magnolia. It looks like sparkling white grape juice, and it has a light, chewy texture. ★★ ★ ½
Voula I like the taste; mint and sweet citrus and flowers. I can't quite place the aroma. Brand 8 would work drizzled on a pound cake, or a semolina cake, or with Gouda cheese. Or crepes! It's light and crystal clear and somehow very youthful. ★★★★★
Sarah I know what you mean - Brand 8 feels kinda fresh and life-giving. It tastes like lemon balm and lilac and smells like bright citrus and cinnamon. This is one of those primal honeys that my body absorbs immediately - like it becomes part of me directly through my palate. ★★ ★ ½

Total: 13 stars