

# HONEY, Be Mine

By **CLAUDIA ALARCON**  
Photography courtesy of **APIS RESTAURANT & APIARY**



It's hard to say exactly how long humanity has been using honey. Cave paintings from 7,000 BC in Spain show the earliest records of beekeeping; bees were featured in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the earliest record of keeping bees in hives was found in the sun temple erected in 2,400 BC near Cairo. Thanks to its healthful properties and versatility, honey has played a significant role throughout human history.

The ancient Egyptians used honey as a sweetener, as a gift to their gods and as an ingredient in embalming fluid. To the Greeks, honey was not only an important foodstuff but was also considered a healing medicine. Greek recipe books contained sweetmeats and cakes made from honey, including some as offerings to the gods. The Romans also provided honey as a gift to the gods and used it extensively in cooking, with beekeeping flourishing throughout the Roman Empire. Before the introduction of the European honey bee, the ancient Maya used honey from native bees to sweeten beverages and to produce a very important ritual drink, the mildly alcoholic *balché*. In fact, one of the most important surviving Maya manuscripts, the Madrid Codex, is largely dedicated to bees and beekeeping. As discovered by Spanish chroniclers of the XVI Century, the island of Cozumel was an excellent place for honey production and the Yucatan Peninsula is still an important producer. If you've ever visited the area, it is likely you have encountered the unique honey liquor *Xtabentún*.

There are over 300 varieties of honey produced in the United States alone. Much like wine, the flavor of honey is

determined by the species of plant used as a food source, as well as the physical location, or terroir. Therefore, honey from a vineyard in South Africa will taste completely different from honey sourced from an orange grove in the Southern US. Central Texas is home to both large-scale and artisanal honey



producers from plants such as mesquite, clover and yaupon holly; honey from herb blossoms like thyme, rosemary and basil is especially coveted.

With so much variety and availability, local chefs and mixologists are more than happy to use this homegrown bounty in their creations. One chef has gone as far as using bees and honey as the theme for his restaurant in Spicewood, in the Hill Country. Hailed as one of Texas' best restaurants of 2015, Apis is garnering national acclaim for its inventive farm-to-table fare, impeccable execution, artful presentations and thoughtful design, which includes hexagonal beehive patterns and details splashed throughout the dining room and patio.

Concerned by the plight of honey bees succumbing to colony collapse disorder, Chef/Owner Taylor Hall started keeping hives at his home about five years ago. He grew so fascinated by beekeeping and honey production that this hobby became the inspiration for his restaurant endeavor, which Hall describes as a microcosm of what the bee represents.

At Apis, the team uses the yield from 20 on-site hives to add subtle flavors to the menu offerings. House-made bee-pollen miso, honeycomb vinegar and honey syrups and infusions impart hints of floral sweetness without becoming the dominant flavor — a tender butter lettuce is delicately dressed with perfectly balanced honey vinaigrette; a soft honeycomb with pollen and grilled bread may be part of the signature chefs' tasting. Hall and his team strive for sustainability, leaving nothing to waste. For instance, after extracting most of the honey, the spent honeycomb goes into a cryovac bag and processed sous vide to infuse a batch of Herman Marshall Bourbon. Beverage Director José Sapién crafts the bar's most popular cocktail, The Apiary, using this concoction alongside lemon, sarsaparilla and dry curacao. To craft The Queen's Nectar, Sapién makes honey syrup, which dissolves much easier than pure honey. The refreshing aperitif combines the syrup with Prosecco, Averna Amaro, fresh grapefruit and Peychaud bitters.

Perhaps the best-known use of honey behind the bar is the classic Bees Knees, a bright and refreshing cocktail composed of gin, lemon and honey, traditionally served up. When celebrated mixologist

Billy Hankey set out to open his East Austin bar, King Bee, he had other ideas for the drink. "When we initially were talking about opening King Bee, we had in our minds that we would serve frozen drinks," he says. "One reason is, as we all know, Texas is warm, hot and excruciating. The Bees Knees made sense to try. It's an extremely easy-going, popular drink and thematically fit with our name." At King Bee, they use Good Flow Honey from Round Rock and a new local gin, Old Highborn Texas Dry Gin, from the makers of Genius Gin. "When you change a recipe into a frozen drink, many things change," says Hankey. The ratios of your ingredients have to adjust for the low temperature, being aware of the alcohol and sugar content as well as the dilution, so the mix thickens properly. All while still ensuring the product is not only delicious but is consistent day to day, batch to batch." The result of weeks of experimentation yielded the bar's delectable signature cocktail, which is not to be missed. "It took some trial and error, but what we have now is a cocktail with a very floral and strong honey nose, sweet but not cloying, deep and rich in flavor that finishes bright and sharp." This amazing drink comes garnished with fresh edible flowers for the full effect.

Back in Spicewood, Hall is excited to add another unique element to the mix, a professionally designed garden with 85-foot beds where they will grow produce and herbs, with rows of fruit trees and grapevines. The garden will not only provide fresh ingredients to use in the Apis kitchen but also a variety of nectars for the bees to feed on, adding new flavor profiles and complexity to the honey they will use in future creations. ❖

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