Creating your own creamed honey

By Skep

What will you do with all the honey you produce? A good question! Here you are, a proud hobbyist with three or four hives, and you've just harvested your first really good crop. Always assuming (as I discussed in a previous article!) that you managed to extract it all.

In the process of doing that you probably ruined a variety of kitchen implements, tracked honey through the house, transferring it from comb to hands to door knob to the rest of the family. So to this point, you've done it the way everyone else does the first time. If you're really smart, you will have filed away all the information for the next time.

For example, the handcrank extractor that walks across the floor unless someone holds it down. Next year you'll remember to arrange some turnbuckles to securely fix it to the floor.

And that bag of cappings that hung around for a week to drain! Next year you'll arrange a proper place to hang it, away from the ants and the carpet. This year, you probably ran the liquid gold directly from the extractor into the variety of jars you located. You ate a lot, gave some to friends, neighbours, and relations. You maybe even sold some to workmates.

In this article I'd like to suggest how you, as a hobbyist, can best prepare and package your honey for presentation, whether as a gift or to sell.

The three most important quality control factors are completely within your control. They are: too much heat, too much moisture, and too many bees' legs. All three can easily damage your product.

Heat is an easy one for you as a hobbyist. Nothing at all like the problem that presents itself to the commercial beekeeper. There is no reason why you should need to heat your honey at all. Apart from the heat of the uncapping knife your honey can be handled at room temperature. If you extract it immediately after removing it from the hive, so much the better.

Excess moisture, leading to off-flavours and fermentation, can be avoided through attention all the way through the honey-from-the-hive to honey-in-the-jar process. Don't extract honey until it is thoroughly ripened. Often, especially if the flow is still on, it may not all be completely capped. Take a frame and shake it over the open hive. If it is thoroughly ripened it should not shake like water out of the comb.

Once you have extracted the honey keep the containers covered. Honey can take moisture from the air so don't leave it exposed, especially if you need to store it in moist or less than favourable locations.

Try to avoid incorporating small air bubbles with the honey as you run it through a fine strainer. Don't simply let it drip through the strainer and into a container; place something in the container so the honey will run down rather than falling into the honey already in the container.

No matter how well you strain the honey after extracting, you still need to 'skim' it a day or so later. The froth

Solar Wax Melter: an ideal way for the hobbyist to deal with wax scrapings and cappings wax.

that floats to the surface of the honey contains small bubbles and wax particles. Skimming the froth gently from the surface of the honey will greatly improve visual quality.

Depending on the quantity of honey you have, there are some excellent containers available to hold it until you are ready to run it into its final jars or plastic pottles. Food-grade plastic containers can be fitted with a plastic tap. Fit a rubber seal and tighten so there will be no leak. If you have insufficient honey to justify such a container, plastic Polypails make good storage containers.

Ever ended up with honey granulated so hard that you can't stick a knife into it? Honey so hard it tears the bread when you try to spread it? Honey with gritty bits of sugar crystals?

It's still honey, of course. Nothing really wrong with it, other than inconvenience and the chance of putting some people off honey forever!

The 'creamed honey' sold in New Zealand must be the source of the most often repeated myth about honey. No foreign materials are added to the honey to make it granulate smoothly. No icing sugar, white sugar, flour, cream or lard (Yes, I have been told that's what beekeepers add to their honey!) or anything else.

There's no reason at all why you, as a hobbyist, should not try to make your own creamed honey, instead of relying on good luck to get a smoothly-granulated honey. Though the results may be variable, you'll have a good time learning a little more about your hobby.

Creaming honey is simply controlling the natural crystalisation process.

Almost all honeys will eventually naturally granulate. Most will within a few months although others remain liquid for longer. In England, such naturally granulated honeys are called 'set honey'.

The speed at which honey granulates, its texture, is mostly a product of the ratio of the two main sugars in honey: dextrose and levulose. For a reason never clearly explained to me, sugars often have two names, confusing things very nicely, thank you. Dextrose is also known as glucose and levulose as fructose. To add to the confusion, levulose is also known as fruit sugar.

If a honey has a high dextrose to levulose ratio, it will granulate rapidly with a fine crystal. If it has a high levulose content, it will granulate slowly and often with crystals so large that you can feel their sharpness on your tongue.

To 'cream' honey, the beekeeper mixes in a percentage of honey that has already granulated finely. This honey is called a 'starter', because its crystal structure will start the liquid honey granulating in the same manner. In order to speed up the granulation, the starter needs to be thoroughly mixed with the liquid honey. Then the container must be kept cool: not cold, not refrigerator-style cold, but simply cool. The ideal temperature is about 14 degrees.

Keeping the honey at this temperature causes it to granulate as rapidly as possible, and since it already has a nice grain started, the entire volume will granulate in the same way as the starter you introduced. Stir occasionally during the process. Once the

granulation is well established, the now cloudy-looking honey can be run into its final containers. Again, it should be kept cool to assist rapid granulation.

In practical terms, you begin the process by finding some finely-granulated honey. This might be some from last season that you kept back or you could even buy some from another beekeeper or the shop. I like to add as much as possible, even up to six kg or so for a Polypail of honey, but you probably don't need that much. If you like, begin with a small amount of starter and bulk it up by carrying out the process twice.

Stir the starter honey thoroughly into the liquid honey. It's not easy, but you need to completely spread the granulated honey through the liquid. Afterwards, keep it cool by placing your bulk container (well covered, of course) in a cool room, such as a basement or cold closet.

Stir it several times over the next week. It should start clouding as the granulation spreads rapidly through the honey. You can now run it into its final containers. Again, keep them cool. The honey should be nicely creamed and set with a fine, smooth grain within a week or two.

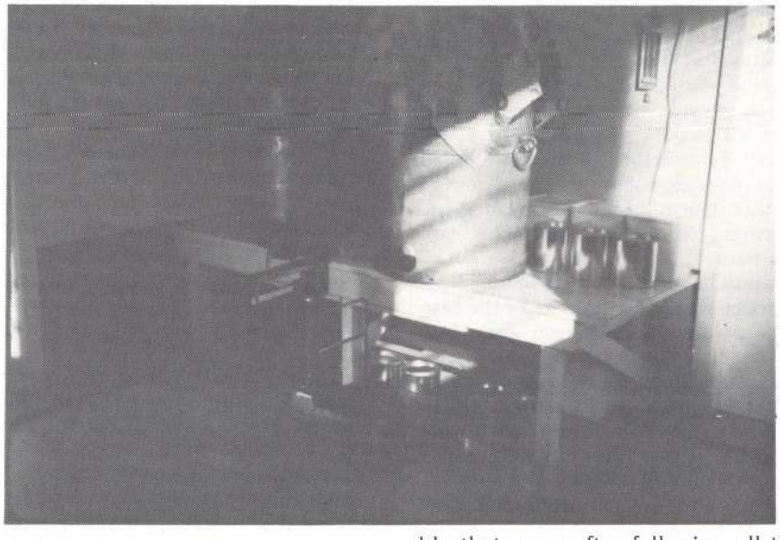
Kiwi beekeepers have been using this process for over 60 years. They figured out that long ago a practical scheme for controlling the granulation in honey.

Credit for the 'scientific' approach to creamed honey goes to an American, a Dr Dyce, a beekeeping professor at Cornell University. He described a complex and detailed method of producing creamed honey that differs little from the basic procedure given above. He did, however, meticulously give temperatures and amounts, such as the ideal temperature to heat the honey before adding the starter, to make sure there were no natural crystals present.

I've always felt that the Kiwi beekeepers never really got the credit they deserved. The way I understand it, Dr Dyce visited New Zealand and saw the process in action several years earlier!

As I mentioned earlier, your results may be somewhat variable. It's possible that, even after following all the directions, your honey might still set hard as a rock. As a hobbyist, you can't control all the factors involved, but the odds are that you'll produce a better product than if you trust to natural granulation.

If you become really interested in the process, you might care to read further about what is quite a specialised subject. I fail to see how anyone can ever tire of being a hobbyist beekeeper: not if you've an inquisitive mind about how things work. Beekeeping provides you with all sorts of excuses to go off at tangents as diverse as entomology and food technology. To say nothing of apicultural botany and woodworking!



A small door-sales' area. The honey is being creamed in the two cream containers, although stainless or food-grade plastic would be a better surface to contact honey.