



Rooftop *Buzz*

As the months get warmer, a team of hive enthusiasts are watching over the rooftops of Melbourne. *BeanScene* speaks to the dedicated beekeepers working to save the honey bee.

For Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi, spring marks the busiest time of the year. As office workers tend to their emails and restaurants prepare for the lunchtime rush, Vanessa and Mat spend their days on rooftops – with the bees.

“You look at the world from a different angle up there,” says Vanessa, a beekeeper with Melbourne City Rooftop Honey. “It’s actually quite meditative. It’s one of those things you fall in love with.”

To help save the Australian honey bee population from the devastating

effects of disease and human habitation, Melbourne City Rooftop Honey have made it their mission to rescue unwanted bees and rehouse the colonies on city rooftops.

Last spring, Vanessa and Mat’s services helped re-home 30 hives, and they’re expecting even more to be re-homed this season. “In summer, the bees naturally divide for existence, so we help re-home the colonies. We don’t ‘buy bees’ as such, we just relocate them to a new home, instead of barbecue lids and possum boxes found in backyards in the summer time.”

As part of Vanessa and Mat’s service to expand their project and the threatened honey bee population, they are inviting cafés, restaurants, businesses and individuals to adopt or sponsor a beehive. All that’s required is two metres of space and a water source. For interested hosts, the beekeeping duo assess the location and install the beehive, which they fully maintain to ensure a happy and healthy bee colony.

Kylie Mackinlay, co-owner of Dead Man Espresso in South Melbourne, says she wanted to support the honey bees as soon as she heard about the concept.

“Why wouldn’t you install a beehive? We’re supporting a sustainable cause, it’s very easy to be a part of and there’s a minimal sponsorship fee,” Kylie says. “When we first approached the landlord, they were a little cautious. But, after we convinced them it was harmless and great for the environment, they supported it as well.”

Dead Man Espresso has had bees buzzing on their third-storey building for two years. Kylie says the bees are never a threat to customers or staff, as they are high up among the skyline, and they continue to thrive on the rooftop of one of Melbourne’s most spectacular city views.

Kylie says the most exciting part of being the adopted owner of a beehive is the production of filtered, raw, untreated honey. “Some of the staff got dressed up in the protective gear and got involved with Mat and Vanessa when they extracted the honey here in our kitchen,” she says. “It creates another level of interest for staff and it’s nice for them to be involved in a small way.”

The host of the beehive gets 20 per cent off the honey produced for the

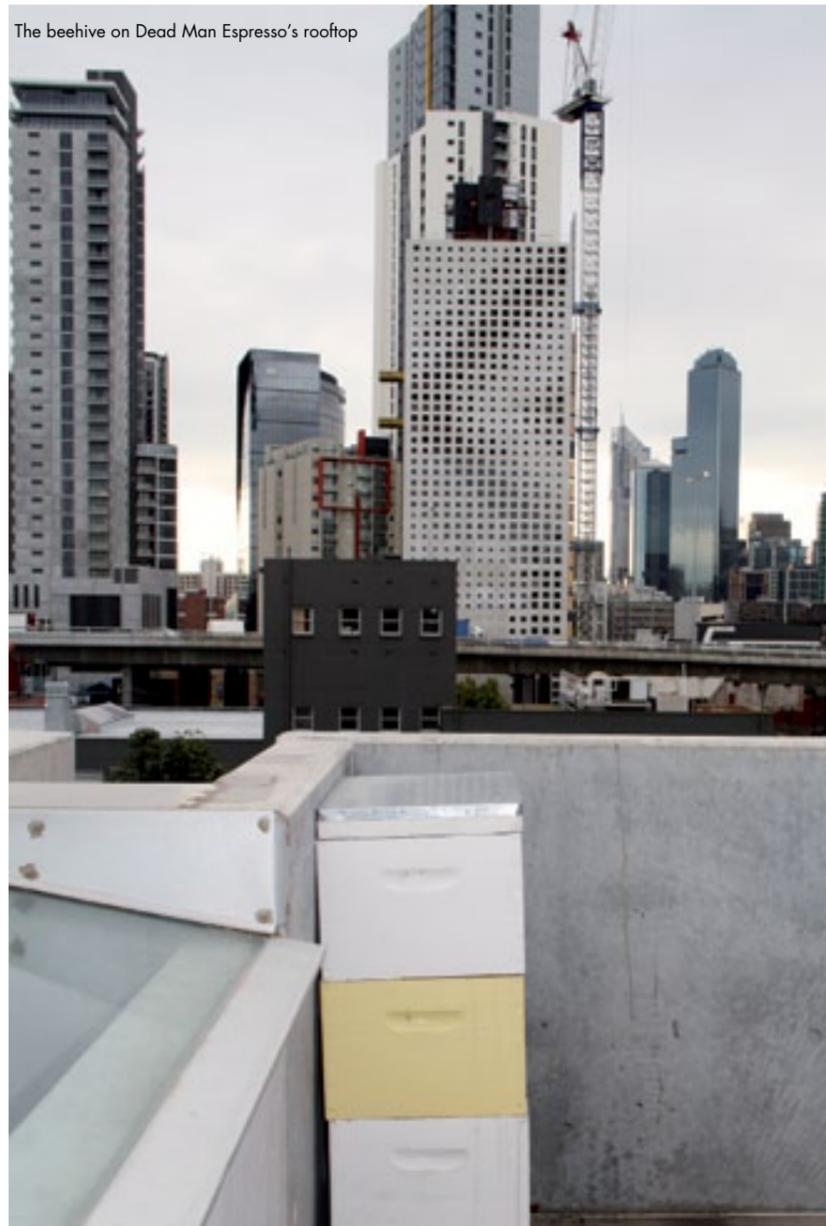
season, and can buy back the remainder to use in their menus or sell in the community. Interestingly, Vanessa says each extracted honey has a different colour and taste depending on the suburb. Honey from Preston is different to honey in Carlton, Fitzroy, Prahran, and St Kilda because of the area the bees forage and collect their nectar.

When in supply, Dead Man Espresso uses the fresh honey in its menu for honey pancakes, and sells the rest on site. “The honey has a beautiful sweet flavour, so fresh and natural. When people ask about our honey, we just say: ‘We got it from the rooftop.’”

For other cafés looking to sponsor or adopt a beehive, Kylie offers simple advice. “Just do it,” she says. “Being able to say you have honey on your doorstep (or rooftop, as it may be) that’s unique to our local area is such a wonderful thing. And in our small way we’re supporting the bee population.”

Vanessa and Mat founded their unique project in 2010 after installing a beehive in their own backyard. “I was interested in chickens at the time, until Mat suggested that bees were more exciting,” says Vanessa. “I instantly fell in love with them.”

A year later, Vanessa and Mat turned



The beehive on Dead Man Espresso's rooftop

security," Vanessa says. "I thought it would be appropriate and appeal to chefs and cafés to know where their produce comes from and encourage them to be more sustainable. It's a way to connect people to food."

Vanessa says the business started tending to a handful of hives on restaurant rooftops in 2010, and it's seen a "crazy response" ever since. Currently there are more than 50 hives around the city of Melbourne and a waiting list of 350 individuals and businesses interested in adopting or sponsor a beehive.

"Interest has generated from all sorts of customers; from people who care about localism, people who are interested in sustainability and people who are into nature and gardening," says Vanessa. "The fact that Melbourne is the foodie capital of Australia has also been a driving force and made the timing of our business nearly perfect."

Vanessa and Mat make regular checks on the beehives every 10 days throughout summer, gradually decreasing their visits in the cooler months. Come winter, the beehives are "packed down" with no checks necessary. In that time, Vanessa says the bees consume the honey they produce to sustain themselves until spring.

Melbourne City Rooftop Honey will soon install a 'Fed Square Bee Village' on top of the Alfred Deakin building on Flinders Street, with a total of 10 beehives, their largest project yet. The site is expected to produce around 300 kilograms of honey each year to supply nearby cafés and restaurants.

This is a huge movement for the honey bee species, which is in desperate need of support. "The worldwide honey bee is under threat from disease and pests," Vanessa says.

The Colony Collapse Disorder CCD wiped out a huge amount of the world's population of honey bees in 2007, and continues to be a threatening problem. For unknown reasons, Vanessa says beehives are being abandoned by bee colonies, especially in the United States.

Varroa Mite, a natural parasite of the Asian honey bee is also an eminent threat. Australia is currently the only continent not infested by this parasite – yet. "People overseas are losing 50 per cent of hives to this mite," Vanessa says. "It's already been identified in New Zealand and Papua New Guinea and Australia will be next, we just don't know when."

When Australia finally does become infested with Varroa, Vanessa says the consequences will be devastating.

She says wild colonies will likely be decimated, and managed hives could experience losses of up to 50 per cent. "All our bees will be wiped out and it'll affect our pollination services," she says.

Already, 700 Asian Bees Swarms known to carry traces of the deadly pest have been caught here in Australia. Efforts are being made to manage the infestation, including surveillance at shipping ports and regular lab testing of hives to ensure this unwelcome parasite is not brought onto Australian shores.

"We want to continue having an army of healthy bees before the Varroa Mite hits," she says. "We have some serious things chasing us that can really impact our food supply chain, but we hope through our role we can provide education."

Australia is home to a large population of European honey bees, which came over during settlement. Over 1500 native bee species thrive in our landscape, including Solitary bees, Social bees and Stingless bees, however they are not all pollinating species.

Vanessa says the precious honey bee is vital to the pollination of agricultural and horticultural crops that produce



The endangered honey bees

Image: Kobyln Charmley

a large portion of Australia's food. According to Melbourne City Rooftop Honey, in Australia, around 65 per cent of agricultural production depends on pollination by European honey bees, including apples, pear and almonds.

With so many cafés, businesses and restaurants getting behind the cause to sustain Australia's honey bee population,

Vanessa is confident that each rooftop beehive installed will go a long way to securing a healthy future for our humble honey bee.

"Bees are so important to our community," says Vanessa. "This project allows us to do something for the environment. We're doing our little bit to help the bees, and I enjoy doing it."

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their hobby project into a sustainable business dedicated to bringing bees back into the city and the suburbs of Melbourne. Their goal is to put a beehive on rooftops in the city and in every suburb of Melbourne to enhance

the honey bee population. The first to trial the rooftop bee hive concept La Luna restaurant and Ladro in Melbourne.

"The community needs to be aware of how important bees are to food

they're here

