

On the city's roofs, keepers get that swarm and buzzy feeling

John Bailey

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Mat Lumalasi tends to a city hive. *Photo: Craig Sillitoe*

In Paris they've had them for centuries, and now Melbourne is discovering high-rise hives.

IF YOU hear a strange buzzing in the city, look up. On rooftops and balconies around the CBD, hundreds of thousands of bees are toiling away at the sweetest manufacturing business there is, while a new breed of urban beekeeper tends to their wellbeing and reaps the profit.

Rooftop Honey is the brainchild of Melburnians Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi. Their original plan was to install hives above restaurants and cafes who would then receive a portion of the honey as rent, but soon others contacted the company offering their space. Now there are 17 hives from South Melbourne to Carlton North and a waiting list of about 40 eager for an apiary of their own.

"It started out as a hobby project," says Kwiatkowski. "I woke up one day and thought it would be a good idea, and was quite upset to realise that most of the world was doing it already. Why weren't we doing it here?"

Urban beekeeping is increasingly popular in cities such as London, New York and San Francisco, while the Parisian population has been tending rooftop hives for hundreds of years. French studies have shown that city bees produce more honey than their country cousins, and have significantly longer life spans.

Kwiatkowski attributes this to the relatively relaxed lifestyle of the metropolitan bee - they don't have to travel as far to forage - and the lack of agricultural pesticides in the CBD (some research suggests that bees aren't affected by pollution, though the jury's still out on that one).

Kwiatkowski said she was surprised to discover the abundance of bee-friendly flora in the CBD. "In the city itself we have about 18 to 20,000 London plane trees, which bees love. We've got quite a lot of diverse plants in the city too, even in people's little terraces and cottage gardens."

Diversity means distinctive flavours. Rooftop Honey has only harvested honey from two of its sites so far, but "they already taste so different to each other", says Kwiatkowski. "We're really interested to see what the variation in the city is."

One hive Kwiatkowski looks forward to sampling overlooks the Botanic Gardens; others are housed at restaurants such as Adrian Richardson's La Luna, Fitzroy bakery Fatto a Mano and Trunk bar and restaurant in Exhibition Street. All aim to feature their home-made honey on the menu.

But there's more to this renewed interest in bees than a sweet tooth. Since 2007 there has been a worldwide collapse in wild bee colonies. The effects are far-reaching: in Australia at least 35 produce industries are dependent on the pollination work that bees do, including those of almonds, apricots and other fruit and nut trees.

Rooftop Honey is the first project to be funded by the Melbourne chapter of the Awesome Foundation, a loose-knit international group that offers \$1000 grants for ideas so crazy they just might work. Other schemes already given an Awesome kick-start overseas include animated robot desk-lamps akin to Pixar's familiar mascot, a database of more than 40,000 hip-hop songs charting the recurring motifs and meanings behind the music, and a human-sized Transformer constructed by kids in a sleepy Chilean town.

Half of Rooftop's Awesome Foundation grant has been spent on a honey extractor to facilitate production.

Kwiatkowski hopes their product will eventually be available to anyone wanting to try out the results for themselves.

"We'd like to work out a sustainable way to sell the honey back to the city community."

"A lot of people are interested in getting their own local honey. There's a market there for it."