


SWILL

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THE OBSESSIVES

The lengths people will go to achieve excellence





For Tim Malfroy, the health of the bees is tantamount

TIM MALFROY

BEE CHARMER

A natural approach to honey and, in fact, life has seen Tim Malfroy create Australia's wildest, most delicious honey

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Over the Grose Valley, the oils from about 90 species of eucalypts hang in the air. Light scatters and takes on a blueish hue. Below the canopies, varying with the elevation, the understory ranges from rainforest plants to scleromorphic trees, broad-leaved shrubs, heaths, sedges and grasses, bringing the total number of species up to around the 1500 mark. As the seasons come and go, those eucalypts will bloom, sunshine wattle will explode into canary-coloured balls and sawtooth banksia flowers will drip with nectar.

At the edge of the escarpment, hundreds of metres up from the valley floor and the base of the cliff wall, through heath and scrub and scribbly bark, Tim Malfroy's bees hum quietly in eight small hives. Track one bee, from the edge of the cliff out into the centre of the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and back again, and it'll return to the hive with loaded legs and a full crop from an ancient place, depositing pollen and nectar to feed its brood, and slowly concentrate and condense into rich, complex honey.

Eventually, after maybe five years, that liquid will be cold-pressed and harvested from the comb, then sealed into jars and labelled Malfroy's Gold Blue Mountains World Heritage Post Brood Polyflora Wild Honey. Twist off the lid and the contents are opaque, dense, flecked with resin (or propolis) and deeply floral with a flavour that's reminiscent of biscuits, maple, herbs and dried apricots, but most of all the place that it comes from.

For Malfroy and his wife and business partner, Emma, when they started keeping bees around 15 years ago, the health of the bees was what occupied them, not the output. "We weren't even concerned about the honey," says Malfroy. "The honey that we produce is an outcome of the natural process that we use, rather than the core focus from the outset."

Rather than run more commonly used Langstroth hives, which are designed to make things easy and efficient for beekeepers while being comfortable enough for the bees, Malfroy flips it. His hives draw on the work of Abbé Émile Warré, a Frenchman determined to democratise beekeeping with his 'People's Hive', a concept outlined in his seminal guidebook *L'Apiculture pour tous*. Warré hives put the bees first, with the beekeeper intervening only as necessary, and harvesting – or, you know, stealing their food – just occasionally when they build up surplus.

"It's really interesting because most hive designs are based on what's good for the beekeeper, making it easy for the beekeeper and increasing honey yield in a variety of different ways. But Warré's method was 'let's mimic what bees do in tree hollows, as they have done for millions of years'," says Malfroy.

An ideal hive, like a Warré, allows the colony to generate heat and maintain a balmy 35°C temperature, whether the sun's beating down in summer or snow's piling up in winter. The scale is another difference; Malfroy keeps an average of just 15 hives together in one place (the Blue Mountains site has just eight), where more commercial operators might keep between 100 to 120. All in, Malfroy maintains more than 300 hives at around 20 sites across three regions, each yielding a different honey.

This approach wasn't exactly the goal when they first set up their hives around 15 years ago, but as the son of a scaled-up beekeeper, Malfroy knew the long hours that came with the gig when done conventionally. As a small-time apiarist, the Warré hives, which they've adapted to local conditions, not only allowed him and Emma to build a system that was suited to the bees, they also made it viable just because the initial investment of time and money was lower.

Keeping your bees alive helps, too, says Malfroy. "If you create a style of beekeeping where you practically eliminate stress in their life – ie not moving them, spacing the apiary so there's no competition for food sources, letting them build their own comb, letting them reproduce naturally, letting them winter on their own honey, not taking all their food from them, reducing your intervention to the colony – you have much, much lower incidence of disease. Over the last 10 years, our losses are like one or two per cent, which is like the natural loss that you would get from established colonies in the wild. The average loss with overseas commercial operators at the moment is between 30 and 80 per cent."

Watching the bees crawl calmly under and around Malfroy's bare hands as he disassembles a hive, the work doesn't seem particularly laborious, but if there's a secret, it's surely in the relationship between him and the bees. Each one might fly out on its own, but when it comes back to the hive it's one part of a network working together to distil the flora from a unique environment into an equally unique product, incorporating honey as well as bee bread (fermented pollen) and propolis. Malfroy's trick, if you can call it that, is letting the bees do their thing.

That takes a certain amount of trust, and a belief in the process. But it also takes work. Years of work. "It just took a long time. A lot of hard work and a lot of time; It's taken like 15 years to get to this point. I don't regret any of it, but that's a big chunk of your life," says Malfroy.

In the early days, this meant balancing beekeeping and building hives with jobs in the music industry (Malfroy's close-trimmed mutton chops are one small throwback to his time in garage-rock band Holy Soul).

Checking the sites, maintaining and growing the hives, harvesting and record-keeping fill his time, then there's logistics and managing the very real threat of floods, fire and frost. Emma, for her part, plays a crucial role managing business behind the scenes.

"The hard work is a grind, but it's not repetitive in the same way that a lot of crafts are. Because you're working with so many variables – the weather, the climate, the flowering patterns – every single year and season and day is different, and the bees are doing different things," Malfroy says.

"So a lot of the daily tasks are the same, but the variables outside that change all the time."

"Our arts background has a massive influence on what we do in terms of an alternative mindset and a bit of lateral thinking. And that's made us approach things differently in beekeeping. You end up with a different kind of outcome."

The couple have also had to wear criticism from parts of a community that'd been using conventional methods for generations. "Even though I never said 'this is an incorrect way to keep bees', if you present an alternative to someone and promote the benefits of the alternative, people will definitely try to take it down. The backlash against us and the other small-scale beekeepers that were adopting this style of beekeeping was pretty savage in the early years, but it has changed a lot now." Seeing his honey featured in dishes at high-end Sydney restaurants Quay, Icebergs Dining Room and Bar, and Firedoor has helped, no doubt.

So too has the feedback from the public, and the knowledge that the end product really is something special. Seeing the bees, tasting the honey, gazing out over the escarpment, you can feel it, too. "If you're out in the bush, like 95 per cent of your life on your own, it puts a spring in your step – you're not just producing some commodity."



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