



the sweetest honey

ANDY NEWMAN MEETS A NORFOLK BEEKEEPER WHO IS 'LIVING THE DREAM', WHILST ROGER HICKMAN REMEMBERS TIMES PAST WITH SOME DELICIOUS HONEY MADELEINES

IF GETTING BACK TO NATURE is what you are looking for, then there are few occupations more suitable than food production. Whether it is growing crops, rearing animals or foraging for ingredients, living in sync with the rhythms of the natural world is sure to play a part.

But there are few types of food production as natural as making honey. Perhaps this explains the huge growth in beekeeping as a hobby – membership of the British Beekeeping Association has nearly doubled over the past six years, with their 24,000 members responsible for anything up to three billion honey bees.

Like so many other types of foodstuff, Norfolk is a great place to make honey. It's not that our county's bees are in anyway superior to those working in other counties; it is the sheer variety of plant life, and hence pollen, which makes this region such a honey-pot.

I first met Leigh Goodsell at the Creake Abbey farmers' market. Leigh is a talented photographer, and for many years made his living in the commercial and advertising world. But over the past six years he has slowly built up a second career, and one which clearly gives him a great deal of pleasure. Leigh is a beekeeper, and markets his amazing Norfolk honey under the simple moniker 'Leigh's Bees'.

Beekeeping is not new to 49-year-old Leigh. He started at the tender age of 10 in his home town of Snettisham; his best friend kept bees, and as is the way with young boys, he wanted to do the same. His mother encouraged him in what he calls a 'floaty sandals type of way', until repeated stinging drove her back indoors and left Leigh to nurture his bees on his own.



Leigh's Bees Norfolk honey

is available from a number of retail outlets, including Humble Pie at Burnham Market, Drove Orchards Farm Shop, Creake Abbey Food Hall and Wiveton Hall Farm Shop. Leigh also attends the Creake Abbey farmers' market on the first Saturday of every month, and the Norwich Forum farmers' market on the second Saturday of every month. For more details, visit www.leighsbees.co.uk.



The interest stayed with him, and keeping bees has been part of Leigh's life since that moment. But it was only six years ago, when the idea of turning his interest into a business first crystallised.

'Like many people I had been re-evaluating what I did for a living,' he explains. 'The advent of digital photographic technology was squeezing the market for professional photographers, so I wanted to find something else I could do to supplement my photographic work.'

The idea of producing a natural Norfolk honey appealed, not least because of the huge variety of plant life around his home (he now lives near Ringstead). From rape in the spring, through May blossom and sycamore, to the summer mix of wild flowers, lime, clover and marjoram, to the sea lavender to be found on the marshes at Brancaster; the mix of nectars gives Leigh's honey the true taste of the Norfolk countryside.

His 40 or so apiaries are dotted around the north Norfolk countryside, on the edge of the marshes, and further inland on organic farms and nature reserves. Farmers welcome his bees – they help with pollination, and increase yields on crops.

With each hive producing around 40-60lbs of honey each year, Leigh's is very much a human-scale enterprise, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Although he would like to expand his business, 100 hives is his limit, because this will enable him to continue making his honey the natural way.

As well as the known origin of the honey, Leigh does not filter his honey, ensuring that it contains the local pollens that the bees wanted in it in the first place (although it is strained through a fine sieve, to remove any stray pieces of wood from the hive, bits of wax and so on).

The honey is then gently heated to 40°C to enable it to be bottled, without destroying any of its natural tastes and enzymes. As Leigh says: 'A bee feasting on a jar of my honey would taste little difference from what it would expect to find in the hive.'

Honey will naturally crystallise, but can be brought back to its more attractive liquid state by gently heating in warm water – although surprisingly, Leigh says that around a quarter of people prefer crystallised honey.

Liquid or crystallised, one thing that does remain constant is the taste, which will reflect the nectar which the bees have feasted on. Leigh's honey is noticeable for the depth of flavour, the range of different tastes and aftertastes, and the complexity. When you have tasted this, you won't ever be satisfied with mass-produced supermarket honey again.

As well as the honey, Leigh sells beeswax polish, a natural by-product of the honey-making process, and a natural way to bring the lustre back to wooden furniture. And his latest venture is beekeeping experience sessions, aimed at those who are curious as to how honey is made, and who want to get up close and personal with the bees.

As with so many artisan food producers, Leigh is very clearly happy in his work. 'I think I probably am living the dream,' he admits. 'I've no desire to get rich – all the work I do, I enjoy.'