

BEE SCHOOL

By Michelle Conway



Ouch! “Yes, you will get stung,” the teacher says with a wry smile. The students at the Plymouth County Beekeepers Association’s “Beekeeping for Beginners” class wince at the thought but are undeterred. This eclectic bunch of beekeeping “wannabees” are eager to learn and ready to take a few stings in their quest for a productive hive. Over the course of the frigid winter months and into the early blush of spring, the students will learn how to get started as beekeepers, how to manage their new hives, and ultimately how to extract their first batch of honey.

Beekeepers are a passionate, quirky bunch: fiercely loyal to their local clubs, always willing to spin a tale, and quick to offer a taste of their golden honey. The Plymouth County Beekeepers Association was founded in 1973 and over the decades has developed into a vibrant club with two hundred members who gather monthly to swap stories, source supplies, listen to guest speakers, and plan activities.

The club is seeking official non-profit status and hopes to expand its ranks and continue on in its educational and charitable missions. Each year the members visit schools, senior centers, 4-H clubs, and camp programs to demystify keeping bees and gathering honey. Association secretary Kim Hatton is proud of the scholarships the club has provided to Camp Farley 4-H club in Mashpee and of their work with The Friends of the Boston Homeless/The Farm at Long Island.

The students at Beekeeping class learn that it is both a simple and not-so-simple experience to keep bees. “It’s all up to Mother Nature—you can’t beat her, you just have to learn to roll with her,” is a common mantra. The bees know what they are doing but sometimes they need a little help along the way. Beekeepers must nurture and monitor their bees, particularly in the early weeks, during droughts, or in poor weather. A new hive of bees requires regular feeding of sugar water to keep the bees nourished as they make the hive their home. Once they have “moved in,” they will leave the hive to look for food themselves, often flying three to five miles in search of nectar.

With startup costs hovering around \$500 and a typical single hive yielding 30-50 pounds of honey a year for the beekeeper, keeping bees and selling honey is not a big money maker. One member joked that he hopes to break even by the year 2023. Some are in it for the love of the hobby; others have laudable goals of nourishing gardens, supporting the local ecosystem, and contributing to nature’s harmony. At the end of the day neat jars of rich, golden honey are the prize all beekeepers covet.

Humans have long known that honey is an essential food. Primitive rock drawings in Africa show humans gathering honey and cave drawings from 7000 BC have been found in Spain depicting people gathering honey from hives in trees. There is evidence of humans keeping bees in artificially constructed hives in what is now Israel about 3,000 years ago. Today’s South Shore beekeepers house their bees in neatly stacked wooden hives in back yards, on farms and in cranberry bogs.

Each August the members of the Plymouth County Beekeepers Association proudly trot out their bottles of liquid gold and spread their good-humored love of all things bee-related at the Marshfield Fair. Members create a buzz-worthy display in the Agricultural Hall replete with honey and honey products for sale, an active hive, an observation hive, and the occasional display of gasp-inducing bee-wrangling. The more seasoned members will calmly reach into the hive and pull out a hand covered in bees, sending young children squealing behind their parents’ backs.

As the summer months approach, keep your eyes peeled as you travel the back roads of the South Shore. Many beekeepers hang out a simple sign offering “local honey.” Pull over and buy a jar. With any luck, you will meet the beekeeper and hear a sweet story of the bees. 

LOCAL BEEKEEPING ASSOCIATIONS

Plymouth County Beekeeping Association
www.plymouthcountybeekeepers.net

Bristol County
www.bristolbee.com

PLACES TO BUY LOCAL HONEY

Beekeepers often sell their honey at roadside stands.

Local honey can also be found at the following locations:

- Most Farmers’ Markets (see listing on page 32)
- The Marshfield Fair, Marshfield
- Foodie’s Duxbury Market, Duxbury
- Quintal’s Market, Plymouth
- Lees Market, Westport
- Good Health, Hanover
- www.beehavin.com





Strawberry Honey Chocolate Tart:

- 1 1/2 cups slivered almonds, toasted
- 1/4 cup butter, cut into pieces
- 3 Tablespoons sugar
- 1 egg yolk
- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon grated orange peel
- 2 teaspoons warm water
- 1 pint strawberries, hulled and sliced

Process toasted almonds in food processor until finely ground. Add butter, sugar and egg yolk; process until dough forms a ball. Chill 1 hour.

Spray 9-inch tart pan (with removable bottom) generously with nonstick cooking spray. Press dough into bottom and up sides of tart pan. Dough will be sticky.

Bake at 350 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes until shell is golden brown. Remove from oven and cool.

In small bowl, whisk together honey, cocoa powder, orange peel and warm water. To assemble tart, spread chocolate filling into cooled tart shell. Arrange sliced strawberries in overlapping rings to cover. Refrigerate until ready to serve. Makes 8 servings.

Courtesy of the National Honey Board

Bee Sweet Banana Bread:

- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/3 cup butter or margarine
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 eggs
- 1/2 cup all purpose flour
- 3/4 cup whole-wheat flour
- 1/2 cup quick cooking oats
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 cup mashed ripe banana
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts (optional)

Preheat oven to 325 degrees.

Cream honey and butter in large bowl with electric mixer until fluffy. Beat in vanilla. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Combine dry ingredients in small bowl; add to honey mixture; add bananas, blending well. Stir in walnuts. Spoon batter into greased and floured 9x5x3-inch loaf pan.

Bake 50 to 55 minutes or until a wooden toothpick inserted near center comes out clean. Cool in pan on a wire rack 15 minutes. Remove from pan; cool completely on a wire rack.

Adapted from the National Honey Board