



Sweetener ... manuka hives at Sweettree Honey; (right) honey at BeesOnline. Photo: Claudia Aalderink

DESTINATION NEW ZEALAND

Buzzword in honey

Lured by tales of manuka's healing power and other regional sweeteners, **Sam Vincent** follows the bees

I'm hunched over a beehive eating honey like a grizzly bear. Running down my chin is a combination of dark honey, wax and a sticky bee cadaver. "You owe me about 50 bucks," beekeeper Martin Lynch tells me. He, too, is eating a piece of honeycomb with all the decorum of a bibless toddler.

He is joking but it's true. We're eating the most valuable honey in the world.

The Marokopa Valley is New Zealand as it appears in Murray Ball's iconic comic strip *Footrot Flats*: doll-eyed Jersey cows knee-deep in pasture, corrugated-iron shearing sheds cum-rugby change rooms and gumboot-clad farmers swearing at their sheepdogs. But while the fictional sheep station of *Footrot Flats* was the very picture of poverty in 1980s' rural New Zealand, the Marokopa Valley has gained a reputation for a lucrative little sweetener: manuka honey.

Harvested from an endemic relation to the Australian tea tree, this New Zealand variety

flavours a honey that sells for as much as \$60 for a 500-gram jar. Its value lies in the so-called "Unique Manuka Factor" (UMF), a lab-determined rating that measures the concentration of antibacterial properties found only in honey made from the manuka blossom.

The UMF rating ranges from 5 to a maximum of 25. The higher the UMF, the higher the price.

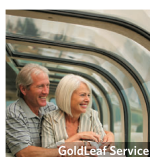
Once confined to the shelves of health-food shops and hippies' pantries, manuka's healing properties are now accepted by the medical fraternity and it is prescribed by doctors in honey, cream, spray and lozenge form to combat everything from cuts and burns to sore throats and stomach ulcers.

I have come to the Marokopa Valley, halfway between Hamilton and Raglan in the North Island's Waikato region, to see what the buzz is about. It's 5.30pm when I arrive at Sweettree Honey, where Lynch has 60 hives in a lush pasture 250 metres above the valley – and I've hit

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rush hour, Marokopa style. Three-and-a-half million commuters are madly buzzing between their hives and the stand of melaleuca-like manuka on the ridge above. The sound is a little like a formula one circuit on race day. "It's worse than Auckland," Lynch jokes.

It is only now, when the late-afternoon sun is at its hottest, that the bees are most active, he explains. It's been a bad manuka season so far, punctuated by unusually cool and wet weather that has ruined much of the manuka blossom and delayed the rest. Today's sunshine has brought out the last of the manuka's tiny white blossoms, like a dusting of snow on the trees.

We don white beekeeper overalls, gloves and mesh face veils, then enter the maelstrom. Bees smack into our veils like a sandstorm. Lynch inspects the hives for signs of marauding wasps, which steal honey to feed their own larvae, and varroa, a parasite that has decimated many of the world's bee populations, though it's under control in New Zealand (and not yet present in Australia). Lynch lifts the lid off a hive with a pair of hands

as gnarled as a wicketkeeper's. As he does this I spray smoke to fool the 60,000 bees inside into believing their hive is on fire, hopefully encouraging them to save the queen rather than sting us.

I've never seen inside a hive; I feel like King Kong peering into a Manhattan skyscraper. It's five storeys high; the top four storeys are divided into eight vertical sheets of honeycomb; the bottom storey is reserved for the queen and drones, the stinging males that Lynch says "have a pretty good life, just sitting around and mating with their boss".

The bees seem unperturbed as their roof is shifted and calmly go about their business even when Lynch removes a big sheet of comb. The honey inside is dark, sweet and delicious but with an obvious medicinal aftertaste – like cough syrup that actually tastes good. Though all manuka honey contains UMF "activity", Lynch says some years are better than others. This year's crop of two tonnes displays a low level of activity, which he estimates to have a retail value of \$10-\$11 a kilogram (compared with \$3-4 for clover honey). What determines high-UMF honey is a

FAST FACTS

Getting there Qantas flies to Auckland from Sydney (3hr) and Melbourne (3hr 40min) for about \$300 one-way including tax; see qantas.com. Emirates, Air New Zealand, Virgin Australia and Jetstar also fly this route from Sydney and Melbourne. The Marokopa Valley is 240 kilometres south-west of Auckland, about a three-hour drive.

Staying there Hotel DeBrett's art-deco vibe and loud carpets make it the funkiest lodging in Auckland; for honey lovers, the breakfast menu has a range of local varieties. Double rooms from \$NZ300 (\$235); see hoteldebrett.com.

Honey tasting
☐ Martin Lynch, of Sweetree Honey, sells his Marokopa Valley manuka honey at Hamilton Farmers' Market, every Sunday 8am-noon; see sweetreehoney.co.nz and hamiltonfarmersmarket.co.nz.
☐ BeesOnline honey centre at 791 State Highway 16, Waimauku, is open 11am-5pm

Wednesday-Friday and 9am-5pm Saturday and Sunday; see beesonline.co.nz. The adjoining cafe, where sugar has been replaced by honey, is an Auckland institution.

☐ For those who don't fancy manuka's medicinal flavour, New Zealand has several other unique endemic varieties. "Soil is as important to the flavour of honey as it is to wine," BeesOnline's Rik Barrowman says. This becomes obvious when I try BeesOnline's pohutukawa honey, from a bottlebrush-like native that grows by the sea; its honey is salty as a consequence.
☐ Other New Zealand varieties include tawari (smooth, like butterscotch), rewarea (dark and earthy) and South Island beech honeydew, a super-sweet variety made from nectar found in aphid droppings. "People are usually put off the taste once they learn where it comes from," Barrowman says.

More information See newzealand.com; aucklandnz.com; hamiltonwaikato.com.

point of conjecture. Almost all highly active manuka comes from a few pockets in the Waikato region but whether this is influenced by soil conditions, individual manuka trees, weather, or the bees themselves is a mystery.

Even in low-activity years the price will be high: up to three or four times as expensive as other honeys. "I know beekeepers whose bank is their drums of manuka honey," Lynch says.

It hasn't always been this way. At BeesOnline, Auckland's biggest specialty honey shop and my next stop, the manager, Rik Barrowman, explains the history of manuka honey. Before its remarkable health benefits were realised in the 1990s, it was considered the bane of the beekeeper.

"It was a junk honey," says Barrowman, wearing the bushy beard that conforms to my stereotype of an apiarist. "They used to feed it to horses before people realised how healthy it was. Now it's our most popular product. I guess you can put it down to marketing."

While BeesOnline's most popular manuka

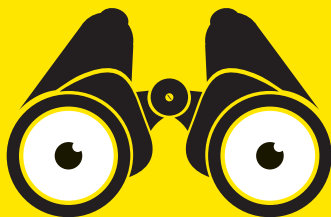
product is the honey itself, other manuka products include hand and nail cream, intensive skin repair, lip balm, "facial tamer", shampoo, soap and moisturiser. There's even bee venom and a manuka detox, said to reverse the ageing process.

Everybody I meet in New Zealand seems to have a different use for manuka honey. At my hotel in Auckland, a staff member claims with conviction that hints at personal experience that manuka is an aphrodisiac. A week later, while towing my hire car out of a ditch near Mount Taranaki, an organic dairy farmer says he feeds manuka to his cattle to cure meningitis. I even hear rumours that the Chinese military uses it on combat wounds. Is there anything this honey isn't good for? When I put the question to Barrowman, he thinks for a moment. "I actually hate eating the stuff," he admits. "Give me humble clover honey any day."

Sam Vincent travelled courtesy of Auckland Tourism and Hamilton and Waikato Tourism.

WTF

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