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Sweet

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THE BEEKEEPER'S DAUGHTER

With hives or knives,
Kimberly McCune
has a lot cooking

BY HEIDI ROBB
PHOTOS BY CLARISSA WESTMEYER



“Honey is like wine, in that it is a snapshot in time.” So says Chef Kimberly McCune and she would know.

She and I are on our way to Auburn Township, where we'll walk the family property and snap photos of McCune Family Apiary hives. A small portion of the 75 to 100 hives are situated on family acreage, with the balance scattered throughout Geauga and Ashtabula Counties on leased properties belonging to Amish and other independent farmers, and on the property of Notre Dame Cathedral Latin. These locations are selected for their abundance of desirable pollen sources in fields of wild goldenrod, berry thickets and orchards of apple and pear trees.

Kimberly is a second-generation beekeeper, and a multi-generational industrious worker. Her grandfather built Chagrin's Club 13 (now Sun Valley Party Center) as a social hall, which became a family affair. Kimberly's mother, Karen, bused tables. Her father, Gene tended bar. Kimberly, then 4, and older sister Kate washed dishes and set up baskets of rolls for dinner service. A peek under a table at the end of many a long night could find young Kimberly curled up, fast asleep.

Gene McCune worked in the automotive industry for Cleveland Transmission Supply and, per Kimberly, was a “workaholic.” So much so that Karen urged her husband to please find a hobby—something relaxing, like golf, perhaps? But much in the way that animal lovers subconsciously bring home pets resembling themselves, Gene was attracted to a hobby that mimicked his own hardworking ethic. The day came when he arrived home with five hives of honeybees and a desire to produce honey from their country real estate. One year later, a “Honey for Sale” sign was posted at the end of the driveway and McCune Family Apiary was in business.



Then 6 years old, Kimberly was fascinated by the insects and began helping her father with beekeeping duties. Gene bought her a child's bee suit, hat and veil, and once appropriately outfitted, she accompanied her father on Saturdays to check on hive production. Using a bee smoker, they would blow gentle puffs of smoke into the hives, lulling the bees into a subdued, trance-like state. Then, with minimum risk, dad and daughter could lift the tops off the hives and check the frames for honey production.



The hives consist of one or more tiers of hive boxes, or “supers,” each containing eight to 10 frames for building comb. Each hive has a top and inner cover, and a bottom board fitted with a hive entrance reducer. The uppermost frames are where the bees build the honey-filled comb, and the bottom is where the hive queen deposits her eggs. There is one queen per hive, identifiable by her longer abdomen. Kimberly marks her queens with a dot of



nail polish. With hive population averaging 65,000, the extra-visible indicator is key to easy queen-spotting.

Honey collection begins by pulling the honeycomb-filled frames. The tops of the beeswax caps are sliced off with a hot knife, and the comb, frames and all are dropped into a deep metal extractor. The extractor operates as a centrifuge, spinning the frames free of the sticky and golden fluid of honey, which collects at the bottom of the tank. The McCune Family Apiary honey is a whole food product, bottled raw and unfiltered.

I sample the McCune's honey and allow it to roll and warm over my tongue and throughout my mouth. It's lovely honey, with high berry notes coming through with a glowing, full, hygroscopic quality.

Much as an oenophile can detect nuances in wine specific to terroir and climate changes, the same can be applied to honey production, each batch imprinted with its own unique marker in time. Detailed journals are maintained to track weather and other agricultural conditions affecting honey production and flavor.

Kimberly feels a fierce connection and commitment to

Geauga County, where she was born and raised. Aside from keeping bees, McCune grew up practicing earth-to-table eating by growing, cooking and preserving vegetables with her family. She entered their honey in the Geauga County Fairs, where it brought home many a blue ribbon. By her junior high school year at Kenston, she decided on the culinary arts as her future, and with encouragement from family and community, Kimberly spent her junior and senior years participating in the Auburn Career Center for Culinary Arts.

The center soon had Kimberly competing and winning many culinary competitions, and upon graduation she was awarded a substantial scholarship from the Chagrin Rotary to attend the Culinary Institute of America. Taking advantage of the opportunity, she worked her way through the two-year associate's degree program, referring to that time as "the best learning experience for classical training I could have had."

Returning to Cleveland, McCune landed a job as part of the opening crew for the 2003 incarnation of Cleveland's (now closed) Classics, in the InterContinental Hotel. During that

SUMMER “BEE-L-T” SAMMIE

Makes 4 sandwiches

2 tablespoons McCune Family Apiary honey

1 teaspoon hot water

8 strips bacon

1 large local tomato, thinly sliced

¼ cup Habanero & Honey Aioli (recipe follows)

4–8 leaves Iceberg lettuce or Romaine hearts

8 pieces toasted whole-wheat bread

Preheat oven to 350° F. In a small bowl, mix the honey with the hot water until combined. Lay bacon on a baking sheet in 1 layer and place in oven for 10 minutes. Drain off fat and brush bacon with honey mixture. Bake for 5–6 minutes more or until crisp.

HABANERO & HONEY AIOLI

2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

2 tablespoons McCune Family Apiary honey

1 habanero chili, seeded and minced

1 tablespoon lemon juice

4 large egg yolks

¼ teaspoon salt

1 cup neutral oil, like sunflower

Add the Dijon, honey, habanero, lemon juice, yolks and salt



to the bowl of food processor. Process until well combined. With motor running, add oil in a slow stream until mixture is emulsified and has thickened.

Toast whole-wheat bread and generously spread both pieces with aioli. Place 1 or 2 lettuce leaves on bottom bread, top with 2 thin slices of local tomato, 2 strips bacon and close with other piece of toasted bread.

time, she names then-manager and sommelier Manny Nieves as mentor into the exploration of the world of fine wines. A bee was now buzzing in her toque to travel, taste and learn about wines at the source. Full immersion came in the shape of a lengthy stay in Arezzo, Tuscany, and Kimberly went on to add “level two sommelier” to her resume.

Once back home in Cleveland, McCune was ever more determined to drive her career forward, but there was also a romance blossoming on the line between Kimberly and a lovable Moxie chef, Jimmy Gibson. Kimberly married her “love of her life, the greatest,” in a pastoral wedding ceremony last summer.

Though Kimberly continued to find herself in wonderful culinary positions at Red, Luxe Kitchen & Lounge and The

Loretta Paganini International Culinary Arts & Sciences Institute, her entrepreneurial fires were burning. Partnering with marketer Ann Larrance, they formed Grassroots LLC with two separate enterprises: Hungry Bee Catering and ReHive Ale.

Hungry Bee is a full-service catering operation, stressing farm-to-plate cooking. In addition to large-scale events, Hungry Bee provides meal delivery packages (Baby on Board, a popular order), and offers “Girls Night Out,” where Chef Kimberly arrives to your home armed with groceries and a cooking experience, whether it be sushi rolling or an appetizer extravaganza for up to eight women. Hungry Bee dazzled a crowd of 200 at last year’s Emerging Chefs Return to Earth dinner, with McCune’s theme of “ReHival,” marking the debut of McCune’s ReHive Ale.

ReHive Ale brewed from Kimberly's desire to craft a honey-based beer from the McCune's honey. I sipped on a ReHive expecting something akin to a fizzy mead, but what I drank was crisp and hoppy with citrus notes and honey apparent yet uncloying with a softness belying the 7.9% alcohol content. Boston brewers Sam Adams have taken interest, but locally, look for ReHive to appear on shelves of Heinen's, Giant Eagle, Miles Market and select restaurants.



POST SCRIPT

When I reconnect with Kimberly in late spring I find her busily pursuing her enterprises. She is thrilled with the attention and health that came from being on Food Network's *Fat Chef* earlier in the year, and she's continuing a regimen to reach her goal weight. Hungry Bee has exploded—so much that she has

rented a commercial kitchen to accommodate the influx of catering and her latest “Dinner in a Bag” delivery option and the McCune hives are in full honey production. 🐝

BLUEBERRY BUMBLE BEE

- 1 cup blueberries (or blackberries)**
- 1 cup soda water**
- 2 tablespoons McCune Family Apiary Raw Honey**
- 1 teaspoon fresh-squeezed lemon juice**

Combine all ingredients in a blender, blend until smooth and pour into a highball glass.



PEACH MOJITO

- 2 tablespoons fresh peach**
- 5 leaves mint**
- 5 leaves Thai or other basil**
- Juice of ½ lime**
- 1 tablespoon honey**
- 1½ ounces white rum**
- 3 ounces peach juice**

Muddle fruit, mint, basil, lime juice and honey. Stir in rum and peach juice. Add ice, stir.



HONEY VARIETALS

Worth
combing
the
countryside
to find



BY KIM FLOTTUM
PHOTO BY TIM SAFRANEK

Every flower has its own individual fragrance, color and feel. Some, but not all, have a sweet magic elixir, an elegant chemistry that produces, with help from honeybees, a one-of-a-kind sweet honey.

Surprisingly, most of the best-known flowers don't produce any honey at all (a rose by any other name still doesn't produce a drop of honey). The best honeys come from the nectar of flowers that are almost always small, often plain, usually ephemeral and delicate but often with a fragrance beyond belief. And to a honeybee's keen sense of smell, these are the flowers with the best of all nectars.

To collect a virgin varietal honey, beekeepers make sure no other honey is stored away in a hive, so only a single-malt honey is captured. Blended honeys (often labeled "Wildflower") may be interesting, but pure varietals are supreme.

Here's a taste of Northeast Ohio's special few:

Our local crop of varietal honeys begins, usually, in May, when black locust trees bloom. Pure black locust honey is so clear it is almost like water; you can even read a computer screen through a bottle of black locust honey. When blooming, the fragrance from even a single tree on Memorial Day covers whole city blocks, and the cascading white flower clusters drip with sweet, sticky nectar. Honeybees fight for every drop.


In June there's clover: abundant, traditional and still exquisite. Always found in your lawn, alongside roads and on field edges.

Clover is the workhorse of honeys. Bold, sweet, darker than locust and with a healthy tinge of gold, it is predictable, comfortable and useful. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

In July there's honey from the basswood tree, also called the linden or lime. They live on city streets and backyards. The honey is mint-like, with a slightly metallic aftertaste. Unique. And not to everybody's taste. Too bold, too ... something. Too good to share, in my opinion.

Somewhere in the summer buckwheat honey appears. A specialty crop grown only by a few, it's for pancakes and flour, and it's the darkest, strongest, most molasses-like honey there is, bar none. You love buckwheat for its rich, deep complicated taste, or you hate it because you think it tastes like dirt. There's no middle ground.

August and September bring goldenrod honey. A butterscotch spread with a hearty, sometimes robust, sometimes smooth and mellow flavor ... those descriptions all fit goldenrod. There are many goldenrod honeys because there are many goldenrods out there. It confuses the issue, but the honeybees know.

So this summer search farm markets and stands. Look at labels. Ask a beekeeper. Find these local single-varietal honeys that bloom in Northeast Ohio in the summertime. You will have a wonderful journey with a truly sweet, unique reward. 

Special thanks to eBee Honey for providing honeys for this article. Find them at eBeeHoney.com