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Photography: Thomas Ströckli*

BIG BUZZ IN THE CITY

Beekeepers and their industrious charges are moving in on Zurich, benefiting not only urban gardeners, but also lovers of local honey.

Having visited the apiary high above the Zurich roofline, the honey on my bread tastes even sweeter now. Its fragrance conjures up images of a bustling beehive and carries memories of its constant humming. Bee colonies are fascinating organisms – and they are absolutely essential: honeybees pollinate some 80% of the flowering plants in this part of the world. While that might seem self-evident in the countryside, it also holds true for urban spaces. And whether produced in an alpine valley or in the middle of bustling Zurich, every jar of honey is the culmination of the bees' indefatigable efforts and the skilled work of knowledgeable beekeepers.

Harvest Day

Morning has barely broken as Anna Hochreutener and Tom Scheuer climb up to the roof to their bees. The light is tinged with the colors of autumn; early August marks the third and last honey harvest of the year. In the background, Zurich gradually starts to stir awake, while the two beekeepers open beehive after beehive, carefully checking the contents of each one. There's little conversation; the work follows a precise rhythm and a system of rules a layperson might find difficult to decipher. Beekeeping is an ancient craft, though here, it is set against an unusual urban backdrop.

To be able to harvest their bees' honey the next day, the two beekeepers install a so-called "bee escape," a type of valve, into the hive. The wooden beehive actually consists of two parts: in the lower level, or brood box, the queen lays up to 2,000 eggs a day in the peak production months of May and June, and in the upper level, the bees store the honey. The bee escape works like a one-way street. Realizing they are separated from the queen by the valve, the bees crawl through it to get back to her. However, smaller holes on the rear of the valve prevent them from returning to the honey store. As a result, it is practically free of bees on harvest day.

Majestic

Marking the queen with a colored dot makes it easier for the beekeepers to oversee their charges.



Early riser
Tom Scheuer harvests honey in the small hours of the day.

Talking shop

As Tom brings the honey frames from the rooftop colonies to the shop, Anna Hochreutener gets ready to extract the liquid gold.



In the swing of it

By spinning the frames that hold the honey combs, the honey is extracted.



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Anna and Tom have around 120 colonies – distributed over a total of eleven sites all over the city, from Altstetten to Escher-Wyss-Platz and as far out as Wollishofen. “Every colony has its own character,” says Anna at her business premises in the Birmensdorferstrasse, where she has been selling her honey for two years. “While one tends to be very peaceful, another tends to be aggressive and obtrusive.” However, a colony’s behavior is also a reflection of the beekeeper’s disposition, she explains. “If a beekeeper is stressed or moves hectically, the bees, too, become nervous,” she says. Bee-handling therefore requires professional training, and Anna considers a one-day course to be too little. After all, “Bees are living creatures,” she adds.

A Long-standing Fascination

Even at 11 years, Anna was fascinated by these complex winged creatures. Her family was living in England at the time, and when her parents registered for a beekeeping course, she insisted on accompanying them. On returning to Switzerland, she had to give up her bees, and life’s current initially carried her in different directions: a photography qualification was followed by stays abroad first, then by work stints as a sailing instructor and skipper. It was only with her partner Tom – also a beekeeper since childhood – that bees once again entered her life. Together, the couple founded the “Wabe3” company, both an apiary and its sales shop, right in the middle of the city. The “3” in the company name refers to beekeeping’s golden rules: 1) wait three minutes after smoking before opening the honey store; 2) always maintain a three-meter safety distance to the flight hole; and 3) if moving a bee colony, locate it at least three kilometers away from the old location. The name also alludes to the queen bee’s guarantee of optimal productivity over a three-year period, that Tom is a third-generation beekeeper, that Anna cared for three beehives as a child, and finally, that their Wabe3 is located in Zurich’s district 3.

But can the bees find sufficient nutrition in the city to be able to produce their sweet gold? Anna smiles. This isn’t the first time she’s heard that question. “The city harbors an unbelievable variety of flowers. There’s something different growing on almost every balcony. If you look at it like that, the variety of food is greater than that in the countryside, and you can taste it in the honey.” Although Anna concedes that the city cannot be compared to an alpine pasture, she does compare it to rural areas: “Monocultures are much more prevalent in the countryside than in the city. Pesticide contamination, too, is lower here.” Perhaps, it’s no surprise that her best production location this year was Zurich’s main shopping mile, the Bahnhofstrasse. “The old botanical garden is close by and offers good nutrition,” says Anna. It may seem somewhat ironic that such a natural product would have its origins in such a vibrant, busy street. Yet, the amount of work the bees perform every day cannot be matched by even the most industrious business people. Last year, for example, Anna and Tom’s city bees produced some 1,500 kg of honey. And since every kilo of honey requires about four million visits to flowers, every jar of the golden substance is something of a natural wonder.

ZÜRICH'S SWEETEST SPOTS

Urban beekeepers often practice their craft in places where you would least expect it – and they strongly support the concept of “local.” Here’s where Zurich is buzzing:

WABE3

Both at the Wabe3 shop and through its website, you’ll find a range of bee-related products and services, from beekeeping classes to lip balm, from beeswax candles and honey cakes to bee sponsorships.

*Birmensdorferstrasse 109, Zurich,
T. +41 43 811 50 19.
» www.wabe3.ch*

BEYER

On the roof of the Beyer Chronometrie company, Wabe3’s Anna and Tom care for ten beehives and their 250,000 bees. The honey is given to their customers as “Beyer Honey.” Those with a keen interest in timepieces can also visit the Beyer Clock and Watch Museum.

*Bahnhofstrasse 31, Zurich,
T. +41 43 344 63 63.
» www.beyer-ch.com*

ZÜRICH MARRIOTT HOTEL

The city beekeeper, Peter Schneider, keeps 26 colonies on the roof of the Marriott Hotel and has responsibility for its “Zürihonig.” The sweet gold is offered at the hotel’s breakfast buffet, but has also inspired its kitchen chefs and barkeepers to experimentation. One house specialty is the “Honey Flavored Gin.”

*Neumühlequai 42, Zurich,
T. +41 44 360 70 70.
» www.marriott.com » www.zuerihonig.ch*

BAUR AU LAC

At the Baur au Lac Hotel, guests can enjoy the hotel’s own honey at breakfast, but it’s also sold in 295-gram jars. The bees live in noble quarters in the hotel’s own park, where their hives have been built as replicas of the hotel buildings.

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