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CHECKOUT
Elaine Reeves

THERE was a time when beekeepers tried to avoid collecting honey from tea-trees.

"It's hard to get a reliable flow from it, hard to extract and hard to pack," says Robbie Charles of Blue Hills Honey.

He has a picture of his father Reuben having uncapped the combs, stacking them in the river to wash out the dense jelly-like honey that otherwise had to be scraped away.

Because tea-trees are among the first to flower, it had some value for building up the bees to take advantage of the leatherwood flow that comes after Christmas.

One year Robbie and Nicola Charles had 14 tonnes of the stuff stacked up to be used for feed over the winter. That was all before the New Zealand name for tea-tree — manuka — was adopted by apiarists. They are both names for *Leptospermum scoparium*, but it makes sense to adopt the Maori name since that is the one recognised for the antifungal and antibacterial effects of "healing honey".

From about 1600 hives placed in the heart of the Tarkine, Robbie collects about 100 tonnes of honey a year to be extracted and packed at Mawbanna. As much as 80 per cent of that will be leatherwood — the icon honey unique to Tasmania.

"Manuka will be about 20 tonnes of that, but the equivalent to 80 tonnes of leatherwood in value," Robbie said.

Some manuka honey can have 1000 times the antibacterial power of other honeys, but all manuka honeys are not alike.

The way of measuring the potency until recently was to rate the "unique manuka factor" or UMF, by measuring the efficiency of the honey against a standard disinfectant. The honey was rated from 5 to 20 UMF.

About a year ago, Thomas Henle of the University of Dresden published findings that identified methylglyoxal as the compound in manuka honey that had the antibacterial effect.

The methylglyoxal level can be measured with a direct chemical analysis, and is a more reliable method than measuring the honey against a disinfectant — plus the honey does not need to be sent to New Zealand for assessment.

The methylglyoxal is rated in milligrams per kilo. A measure of 30+ is equivalent to 5 UMF, and 400+ of methylglyoxal equals 20 UMF.

Only analysis will confirm the presence of methylglyoxal, but Robbie says he tends to know what areas produce the higher grades now.

"The poorer and the rougher the soil is, the better activity there is," he said. Quality can



GOLDEN HARVEST : Robbie and Nicola Charles collect about 100 tonnes of honey a year from the Tarkine. Picture: CHRIS KIDD.

Honey, it's a winner

also depend on the variety of manuka — some 83 different tea-trees grow in Tasmania - and where it grows.

"We are looking at the best time to harvest it and to pack it," Nicola said. It does mature and the activity does increase. It's just like wine — we put it down in batches and test batches and we try to pack it at its peak."

The honey is tested at harvest, every three months, and then at packing — just as well Nicola found a person who could do it in Tasmania.

Chemist Charles Dragar recently moved his laboratory from Melbourne to Hobart. He analysed the Charles' honey for methylglyoxal and has since been "surprised at the number of people in Australia who have been in

need of someone to do this work".

He recently analysed Tasmanian honeys from 10 apiarists for their antioxidant content. Prickly box honey rated highest, and leatherwood from the North West, where Robbie and Nicola operate, was not far behind, but leatherwood from the South had less than half the levels of that from the North West. Manuka, tallow wood and Pedder wildflower honeys were also high in antioxidants.

Now there are moves afoot to obtain funding to test leatherwood honeys for their anti-inflammatory properties.

Tasmania's forest pharmacopeia could allow us, like the ancient Egyptians, to use different honeys for different ailments. Dragar warns though against

trying to extract elements of the "very complex food" that is honey. "Therapeutic effects may lie in far more subtle and synergist effects with other parts of your diet," he said. And a dose of healing honey is nothing like taking castor oil. The Blue Hills Manuka Honey won a gold medal at the 2008 Royal Hobart Fine Food Awards, and judges there have no regard for its methylglyoxal count.

Like leatherwood, manuka honey has a bold and distinctive taste, a rich toffee with malt notes. Only its price might prevent you spreading it on your breakfast toast — unless, of course, you are targeting the ulcer-causing bacteria, helicobacter.

Blue Hills Leatherwood Honey

was awarded best organic food product at Organic Expo Australia this year. About 75 per cent of the honey the Robbie and Nicola produce is certified with Organic Food Chain. Nicola said the export market — about 85 per cent of their honey leaves Australia — demanded certification. Organic status is not difficult to maintain in the heart of the Tarkine, but can get tricky when the hives are brought down over winter to keep them away from sprays and rubbish tips.

Other sources of honey are not as reliable as the leatherwood, which flowers for a good few weeks almost without fail, nor as valuable as manuka.

Stringybark might have a good nectar flow only once in an apiarist's lifetime — in Nicola and Robbie's case that was in 2007, when they got 16 tonnes.

And they have access to some spinoza or prickly box from Cape Grim, where there is the purest air and rainfall in the world. John Zito of Nutpatch has made them a "concept" batch of honey encased in dark chocolate, which I tried — it definitely seemed to do me some good.

Blue Hills honeys are available in Hobart in Salamanca at Fresh Fruit Market, Naturally Tasmania, Norman and Dann, The Salmon Shop and the Wilderness Shop and at Naturally Tasmania in Elizabeth Mall and at City Organics in Criterion St. Further afield it is at Barilla Bay, Gate Way Cafe at Orford and at the Port Arthur Historic Site.