

# Fruit cream honey sweetens niche market sales for Quebec beekeeper

by Susanne J. Brown

(St-Stanislas-de-Kostka) The fruit (and spice) of beekeeper Joel Laberge's labour is sweetening his niche market for cream honey sales in Quebec and across Canada.

Three years ago, a Montreal company, *Honey Hollow*, approached Laberge to add seedless concentrated raspberry, blueberry, and strawberry fruit, and cinnamon spice (not extracts), to his particular type of cream honey. In the two years since his four new cream honey products have been on the market, "sale demands have quadrupled," he says.

## **An advantage**

Other producers may try to duplicate *Miellerie St. Stanislas'* success at consistently making a "stable" fruit honey, Laberge says, "but I have an advantage over the competition that I owe to my father."

Joel's father, Paul-André, had been in the bee business for 34 years at the time of his death this past winter. But *Miellerie St. Stanislas* only really established a name for itself a little more than a decade ago when Paul-André invented a churn-like machine to process cream honey from liquid honey, rather than using fine, crystalized honey. Part of the process also includes refrigerating the freshly creamed honey for 72 hours at a "certain temperature."

"It took 10 years to develop the cream honey to what it is today," says Laberge. "If it is too cold, or too warm, the honey won't be stable."

Similar in respect to the success of Kentucky Fried Chicken, the precise temperature to produce "stable" honey is a well guarded Laberge Family secret, as is the recipe for the fruit and the spice honey.

## **Expanded markets**

Laberge is also a step ahead of the competition with his distribution set-up and for having continually expanded his markets in the past two years. Laberge has also spent three years in a hit-and-miss selection process of what type of fruit can be successfully incorporated into his honey.

"The fruit is hard to find. Some fruit sours after a week, some sours in three months. I've tried fruit from Germany, Europe, and the U.S," he says.

To consistently produce a high quality product that will pass blended-food product inspection tests, Laberge gets his seedless fruit from western Canada and western U.S. states.

While the fruit is expensive, Laberge concedes, the spice is far less costly and can be easily picked up at a corner store if need be.

Before the fruit is added to Laberge's creamed honey, 75 per cent of its' water is evaporated. One pint of fruit is reduced to one tablespoon of concentrated purée, and then added to one pound of creamed honey.

Laberge's fruit honey sells in local grocery stores and under the *Honey Hollow* label in gift shops across Canada. On average, one pound of his regular creamed honey sells for \$2.25, while the fruit honey sells for \$1.00 more, (\$3.25). The cinnamon honey is less costly at \$0.25 more per pound.

Just as the fruit changed the honey into an entirely new product, Laberge has noticed a dramatic change in the type of consumer he is now serving compared to the customers that came to his father's door.

### **Bulk buying days gone**

"People are looking for less quantity and more variety," he says.

Gone are the days of people buying 30 to 40 pounds of liquid honey. So, Laberge now concentrates approximately 70 per cent of his operation into producing cream honey. As each year goes by, he expects to produce less liquid honey for sale.

"The stores have also become more demanding," he says. Not only do the stores want quality products, but they also want a consistent supply and variety.

The demands of the marketplace have resulted in Joel "devoting more time to the challenges of the market" compared to his father who focused all his energy on production.

Joel's father started with two hives and built his colonies up until he had 750 hives last winter. However, since taking over the operation, 26 year old Joel has reduced the number of colonies down to 425 hives, so he can concentrate on marketing his new honey products.

He has also hired two all season employees; one is his mother, Pauline, who does extraction and helps pack the honey, and another worker helps do manual labour out in the fields.

By concentrating on marketing "more variety, I'll reach more types of consumers," says Laberge.

Another fruit and honey marketing venture Laberge has embarked upon is promoting his bees as top-notch production boosters. Laberge rents his 425 hives to apple producers in the Rockburn-Hemmingford area in early May to help with pollination of orchard trees.

Producers can expect a "30 per cent increase in production" in one year by having hives among the fruit trees, he says.

"Pollination is in demand as more and more producers realize the benefits of it," says Laberge. "I could go from Lac St. Jean to California. There is that much demand. But for now, for us, we're in the cream honey business."

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