SWEET LOVE

By BEN LUSCHEN | *Photography By* LORI DUCKWORTH

Drizzle it over biscuits, use it to sweeten a cup of tea, or just sneak a spoonful out of the jar every now and then—there's nothing like Oklahoma honey.

THE BUZZ OF several thousand bees unites in a choral hum. Tiny dark specks whirl in and out of view, pelting against their guests' baggy cotton jumpsuits like a windless dust storm.

For the bees, these boxed hives in rural Coweta are home. For married couple Greg and Shelly Hannaford, the founders of Hannaford Honey and Tulsa Urban Bee Co., this is a workplace. Beneath the July sun, already potent in mid-morning, the couple lifts the boxes heavy with frames of dripping honeycomb onto the back of Greg's pickup truck for later extraction.

In addition to honey, Roark Acres Honey House in Jenks also sells beauty products, candles, candies, clothes, and even bees.

Your humble correspondent, eager to appear brave but not at all eager to be stung, stands a couple of safe paces behind the Hannafords. The caution only goes so far, as a bee plunges its stinger into my left arm. Despite the bee suit's thick cotton layer, I feel a muffled but sharp tingling sensation. Choking back mild pain, I ask Shelly how many times she's been stung.

"Today or in my life?" she asks.

Her answer is twice today—so far. The Hannafords have been pulling honey full-time since 2012. After nine years, a single sting hardly qualifies as a noteworthy event.

This is step one in the Hannafords' honey-pulling and extraction process. Like the hives themselves, the bee business in Oklahoma is a swirl of interconnected actors—bees and keepers; flowers and honey; buyers and suppliers. The swarm bends, breaks, and reforms in unexpected ways. Shelly was pulled into the business by her husband, who's had a lifelong fascination with the pollinators.

"He loves the bees, and I love him," she says.

After a promising pull, Greg lowers his protective hood and climbs into the pickup, where a few rogue bees linger in the cab. The longtime keeper is unconcerned. Most of the time, he doesn't even wear his protective suit to check hives—just jeans and a mesh veil.

"They can be really bad," Greg says, "but some can be just like puppies."

Humans, he explains, have mammal minds. We can wrap our heads

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around the biology of a cow, cat, or dog. Birds are just a few steps behind, but bees? They appear alien and unrelatable inside their exoskeletons. If anything, shouldn't they be feared and not protected?

Greg says nothing could be further from the truth.

"A lot of people have a real hard time understanding that just because they're insects doesn't mean they don't need proper care," he says.

HONEYBEES ARE NOT native to this continent. The European honeybee first arrived on the East Coast with European settlers in the 1600s and began to spread westward across North America with colonial explorers in the seventeenth century. Oklahoma State Beekeepers Association President Forest Chapman says the first reported honeybees in Oklahoma came in 1884—nearly a quarter century before statehood.

"I believe it was the wealthiest people who started keeping bees," Chapman says. "As time went on, it became a commoner's way to make a living."

Though they are non-natives and are not required for the reproduction of indigenous plants, the little insects have come to fill a big role as agricultural pollinators. For instance, honeybee pollination is critical to almond farming in California. Some commercial-level keepers in Oklahoma have contracts with growers in other parts of the country and transport their hives across state lines to facilitate pollination.

"Many of the plant species in North America are primarily pollinated by them," says Rick Schantz of Harrah, who runs about 150 active hives for his Central Oklahoma Honey Farm. "The bees are an intricate part of North America now. We would lose whole species of plants if the honeybee disappeared."

Today, honey is produced in all fifty states, but due to a variety of factors, Oklahoma is one of the states in which it's hardest to produce a commercially significant amount. The state's up-and-down weather patterns limit its ability to churn out a consistent output. According to Michael Roark, co-owner of Tulsa's Roark Acres Honey Farms, the state's plant life is the biggest impediment.

"We don't have the wildflower population, and we don't have the huge stands of sweet clover like they have in Nebraska, the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin," he says. "We don't have anything in the way of row crops that make honey—there's a little cotton here and a little soy beans there. Those do produce some nectar for the bees, but not a tremendous amount like they do in other states."

But less honey does not translate to worse or less flavorful honey. In fact, the honey produced in Oklahoma tends to be much darker in color and sweeter than the light golden, clover-raised variety found in most grocery stores. Schantz says every batch will vary in flavor depending on where it was produced.

"It just stands to reason," he says. "Every flower has got a different color nectar, and every flower has a different flavor profile."

The average honeybee creates only one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in its lifetime, but bees are team players. A large colony can contain up to 60,000 of them at peak population times.

DESPITE CHALLENGES IN producing a large quantity of honey in Oklahoma, there are millions of honeybees in the state—more than at any other point in history. There are more beekeepers as well.

Greg Hannaford of Hannaford Honey and Tulsa Urban Bee Co. collects box hives from a bee yard at the Philbrook Museum of Art.

Chapman says there are as many as five thousand keepers in Oklahoma, mostly at the hobbyist level. Popularity has spiked along with worldwide efforts to save bees from the widespread phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder. There currently is no scientific consensus on the cause of CCD in the United States, but the use of pesticides, the spread of harmful mite infections within hives, and the loss of habitat are among the most commonly cited contributors.

Among the state's thousands of keepers, only a few hundred produce at a commercial level. Roark spent many years working a desk job in information technology before getting a couple of hives for his garden nine years ago. The bees became an addiction. Two hives turned into fifteen, which soon turned into 150. Roark Valley had as many as 1,600 hives two years ago before losing around 800 in a truck crash in April 2018 that spilled his bees all over the highway near Paris, Texas.

Many keepers get hooked on bees because they find the insects' biology and hive behavior fascinating. From rural farmers to urban hippies, Schantz says beekeeping is a great unifier across demographics. The little insects never fail to bring people together.

"The term *beekeeper* expands to every socio-economic background you can think of," Schantz says. "For hobbyists, I haven't seen a single profession off the top of my head where I haven't heard of a beekeeper in that profession. It really connects people; it's amazing."

COLLECTING HONEYCOMB IS one thing. Separating the sweet substance from the wax comb and storing it is another process entirely. What that extraction looks like varies depending on the size and needs of the keepers and ranges from hand-cranked spinners all the way up to industrial turbines.

Greg and Shelly Hannaford extract honey at their own facility near Jay. Their warehouse contains two large, automated spinners, and the floor is coated in raw honey, which is slick like oil. The comb frames are removed one by one from the wooden box hives and fed through a conveyor belt machine that helps remove the natural wax cap over the hexagonal honey cells. The Hannafords save the leftover wax for balms and other wax-based products they sell at farmers markets.

When the cap has been removed, the frames are loaded into steel turbines and spun at high speed for several minutes, the centrifugal force throwing the honey from the comb. The sweet golden gel flows out of the turbines and is collected in buckets, eventually finding its way into large white barrels for storage. As the honey sits overnight, excess clumps of pollen and wax rise to the top and are strained out one last time before the final product is finally ready for bottling.

The Hannafords bottle their honey in a back room at the same facility. From there, it is loaded into the back of their Chevy

The Hannafords bottle their honey at a processing facility near Jay and keep more than 400 hives in northeastern Oklahoma.

Maria Morris, right, with She Brews owner Rhonda Bear, has found a renewed sense of purpose running a catering company and working at the coffee house's Tulsa location. She Brews uses local honey in its food and drinks.

Suburban and taken for wholesale at farmers markets, local festivals, or one of several Tulsa-area stores like Akins Natural Foods.

Of course, honey pulling and extraction are just part of the year-round work the Hannafords put in for Tulsa Urban Bee Co. The labor also includes building equipment; splitting large hives into smaller, more manageable colonies; and making sure the hives stay well-fed and healthy throughout the year.

Before the Hannafords converted Greg's beekeeping hobby into a full-time career in 2012, they owned their own construction company. The bee business has come with its share of challenges, but Shelly is content with staying out of the traditional working world.

"We're better self-employed," she says. "This whole, 'I've got to be there at eight in the morning' thing—really? No; I've got things to do today."

LIKE HONEYBEES, HUMANS are social animals who depend on community for survival. Maria Morris found hers serving lattes at She Brews Coffee House with locations in Tulsa and Claremore.

She Brews' all-female staff is made entirely of former state prison inmates. Morris spent ten months behind bars on charges of child neglect after her daughter, Carabelle, was killed in a house fire. Now, in addition to her work at She Brews, she runs a catering company named for her daughter.

"I wanted to do something in her name," Morris says. "I knew I could push; I knew I could go further if it was for her."

She Brews carries many of Morris' items on its menu, including overnight oats and an outstanding breakfast burrito. Each pairs perfectly with the shop's iced honey latte, which has a subtle but distinct sweetness reminiscent of Golden Grahams cereal milk. The drink's more tangy cousin is the cafe's iced Legendary Golden Latte, which uses turmeric and other spices in addition to its Tulsa Urban Bee Co. honey base. And just like the popular drinks she serves daily, Morris makes several of her varieties of oats with Hannaford honey, including the distinctively sweet Peaches & Cream.

For She Brews employees and bees alike, communication and unity are vital. Respect and sweet local honey keeps She Brews together. In this world, there can never be too much of either.

"We're just trying to share hope," says SheBrews owner Rhonda Bear. "The honey is a part of our foundation."

In more ways than one, respect is the key tenet of beekeeping. Respect for the environment, respect for other keepers and, most importantly, respect for the bees is necessary for successful and responsible keeping. For Greg Hannaford, the care required in beekeeping is an act of faithful stewardship for the delicate balance of life on Earth.

"These are living creatures," he says, "and they don't belong, necessarily, in your backyard. They don't belong on the North American continent, but they're here, and if you're going to keep them, you're going to need to be responsible for them, and you've got to give them the best care that you can."

THE FOOD ISSUE

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OKLAHOMA STATE BEEKEEPERS ASSOCIATION
- oklabees.com

TULSA URBAN BEE CO.
- (918) 852-3129
- tulsaurbanbeeco.com

CENTRAL OKLAHOMA HONEY FARM
- 333309 East 1024 Road in Harrah
- (405) 964-2337
- centraloklahomahoney.farm

THE HONEY HOUSE
- 217 East Main Street in Jenks
- (918) 578-9201
- roarkacres.com

CARABELLE'S EATS AND TREATS
- 1124 South Lewis Avenue in Tulsa
- (918) 982-7947
- carabelleseatsandtreats.com

SHE BREWS COFFEE HOUSE
- 1 North Lewis Avenue in Tulsa
- (918) 933-5070
- 414 West Will Rogers Boulevard in Claremore
- (918) 923-6020
- 1601 Old Country Club Road in Claremore
- shebrewscoffeehouse.org