

Buzzing Metropolis

Words by Annick Weber Photography by Emli Bendixen

Amid glass skyscrapers, Victorian terraces and lush parkland, London's bee population is keeping busy foraging for the sweetest nectar and producing some of the most multi-faceted, multi-floral honey varieties



London beekeeper Camilla Goddard

Sixties pop song lyrics aside, honey is more than just sugar, sugar. Like a wine hinting at sun-filled vineyards or an espresso made from freshly roasted beans, the golden syrup packs a patchwork of flavours. Whether it's thyme, lavender or verbena, these subtle notes indicate a thing or two about the natural and seasonal environment the sweet elixir was produced in.

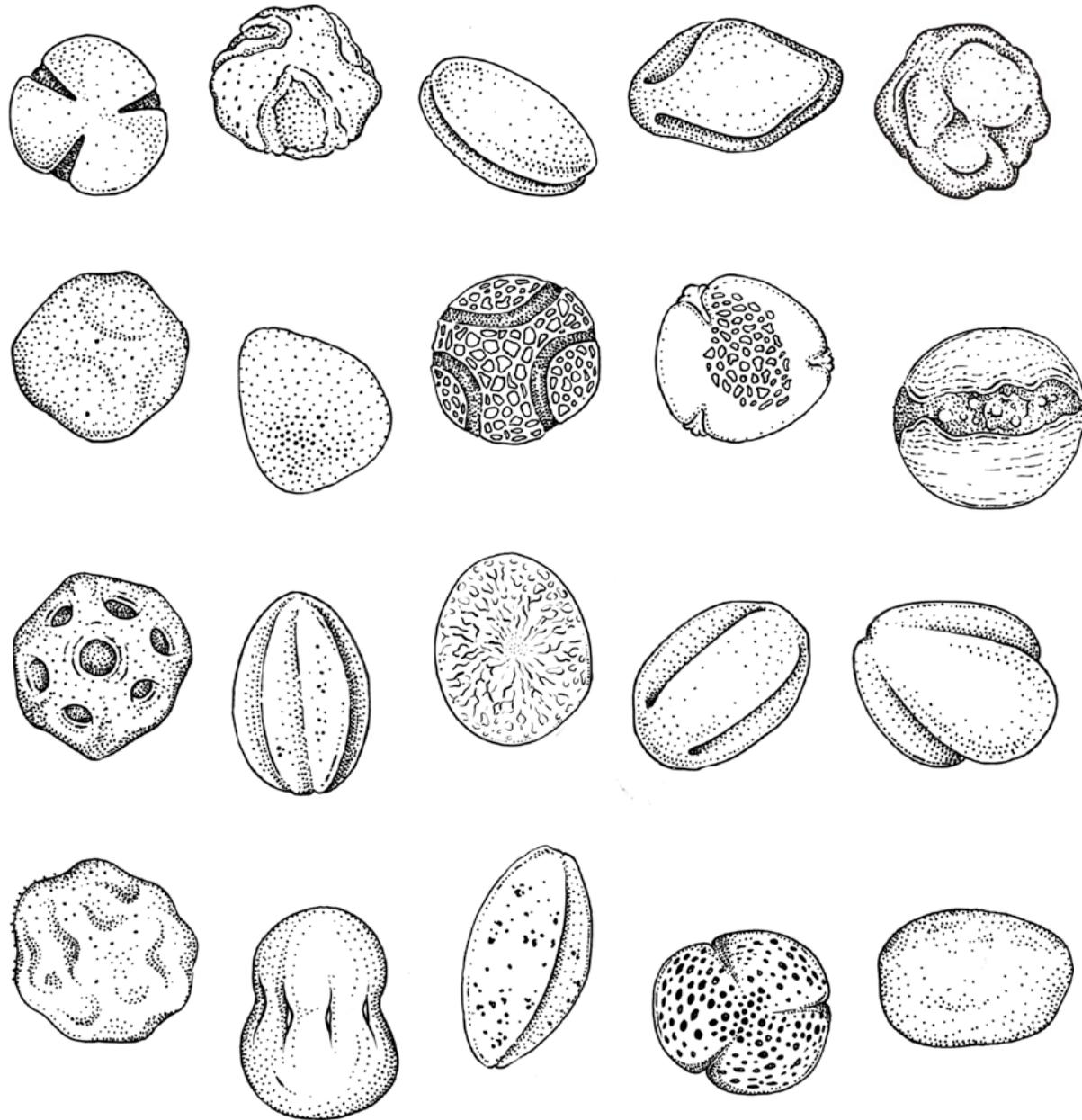
Honey, of course, is nectar from plants, which the honeybee has sucked out using its long, tube-like tongue and brought back to the hive in its belly. Back at the hive, the sugary fluid is passed onto a worker bee, from mouth to mouth. This worker bee then chews and regurgitates the semi-digested nectar into the honeycomb cells, where it solidifies and thickens to goeey molasses – better known as honey. Each comb – or, later on, jar – of honey contains a multitude of tiny bits of flower pollen that tell the tale of the journey and appetites of the bee colony behind it. What was flowering at the time the honeybees flew out to forage? Which plants had the juiciest nectar to feed off? Varying by beehive, surroundings and season, it is hard to find two honeys that taste exactly the same.

Most of us think of honeybees as countryside living and loving creatures, bumbling around verdant woodlands and blossoming fields, but they feel just as at home in urban environments. London alone counts some 3,500 beehives, and with its numerous parks and home gardens, the British capital is a playground for our stripy pollinating insects. Contrary to the common belief, the city's many green spaces boast a panoply of nectar-rich, exotic plants, and a new wave of urban beekeepers has in the last few years been producing multi-floral honey varieties more intense and rich in flavour than most of those from the countryside.

London-based beekeeper Camilla Goddard stands by a beehive on the roof of one of the buildings belonging to the University of London's Russell Square campus, in Bloomsbury. Dressed in a beekeeping suit and gloves, she pulls a honeycomb frame from the hive body to check on the status of the bees. The hexagonal wax comb within the frame is covered with hundreds of members of the thriving colony, all in the process of filling the individual cells. "The honey is ready when the bees have capped the honeycomb with wax", explains

Pollen grains found in London honey

Winter Aconite Verbena Snowdrop Sedum Mahonia
 Winter Honeysuckle Lime Tree Lavender Ivy Horse Chestnut
 Christmas Rose Comfrey Geranium Buddleia Foxglove
 Crocus Tomasinianus Hebe Catmint Elderflower Apple Tree



Illustrations by Katie Scott



The rooftop of the University of London in Bloomsbury

Camilla, as she puts the colony's work-in-progress back. A full-time apiarist, she does this on a weekly basis in various London locations, alongside holding workshops for beekeepers-to-be, supplying local cafés with her honey and collecting unwanted swarms from people's homes.

With its numerous parks and home gardens, the British capital is a playground for these stripy pollinating insects

"This job makes you feel different about London", says Camilla. "I see the city from the rooftops. I can peek inside the windows around me and see people at work at their office desks, a bit like the protagonist in the Wim Wenders' film *City of Angels*." A good four years ago, Camilla was still one of these people at an office desk, too. She was working as an arts consultant for public schemes and had started tending honeybees on the side, before she decided to make her hobby a full-time endeavour in 2011. "I grew up on a farm in the countryside, so, in a way, I've gone back to where I've come from. Beekeeping is my way of farming in the city, of being connected

to nature, the seasons and to what's flowering. Just like gardening, it is extremely therapeutic. You have to stay calm around bees at all times, otherwise you get stung."

The spread of locations of Camilla's urban hives takes her from the roofs of Bloomsbury, Euston and Westminster in central London, to the tree-lined parks of Greenwich, and to the overgrown gardens of the south east London neighbourhood of Brockley, where she lives. Often just a stone's throw from one another, each beehive produces a different honey, entirely unique in colour, flavour and taste. When flying out to search for nectar, the honeybees tend to stay within less than three miles of their colony. So, the honey produced inside the hive reflects the seasonal plants within that specific radius – Mediterranean honeywort from the flowerbeds of nearby Regent's Park, for example, lends a particular exotic sweetness to Camilla's light-summery Bloomsbury honey; the horse chestnut trees of Greenwich park give Camilla's autumnal Greenwich honey a dark-brown colour and warm, caramel-like flavour; and the elderflower blossoms from the residential back gardens of South London bestow a refreshing tanginess on Camilla's Brockley honey.



Colourful beehives in residential Brockley



St. Ermin's Hotel near St. James's Park in Westminster



The grounds of the Greenwich mausoleum

One could draw a botanical map of London based on the pollen found in the honey produced in each beehive across the city. A pollen analysis from September 2012, undertaken by the St. Ermin's Hotel near St. James's Park in Westminster (a further rooftop beehive that Camilla tends), revealed that the honeybees buzzed back to their hive with no less than 55 different types of nectar in their bellies. "I discovered plants that I hadn't even heard of, but thanks to the bees, I got to know them", says Camilla. While the main pollen components of the hotel's honey were sweet chestnut (40%), blackberry (19%) and maple (9%), it also contained water lily from the ponds of nearby St. James's Park (4%), mulberry (4%), non-native Buddleia (3%), myrtle (2%), as well as less than 1% of Mediterranean geranium, citrus, sweet clover, thistle, fuschia, poppy, figwort, potentilla rose, Himalayan balsam – and the list goes on and on.

What specific plant a honeybee feeds from, however, is not up to its individual gusto. It depends on the communal decision of the colony it belongs to – which, with up to 40,000 members in the summer and 5,000 in winter, one would presume is not an easy one. "Bees are self-less and entirely community-minded animals. It's a good social example to

be looking at every day", Camilla says with a smile. In the 1940s, Austrian ethologist Karl von Frisch discovered how the bees communicate their collective verdict on where to forage. Almost 80 years later, the Nobel laureate's discovery is no less remarkable: if a honeybee has just discovered a patch of plants yielding particularly succulent nectar, it performs a figure-eight-like dance – known as the Waggle Dance – to share the location and distance of the food source with the other members of the colony. The speed of the dance indicates how far away the blossoming spot is, while the direction the tail waggles to points towards it. For the bee population, the Waggle Dance is a map and compass in one.

A typical honey from a beehive in central London can boast over 55 different types of flower pollen

Bees see cities like London through different eyes from us two-legged urban dwellers. The things that we may not like – the clover that we mow off in our back garden or the privet blossoms that we clip from our front yard hedges – appear just as

attractive and nutritious to them as the most exquisite rose bush. What attracts a bee to a particular blossom are the nectar content and the ultra-violet glory it shines in. Like all pollinating insects, honeybees can see in the UV spectrum, invisible to the human eye. In ultraviolet light, the most nectar- and pollen-rich floral species glow in the warmest colours. To us, a simple yellow dandelion might be just another annoying weed in our lawn, but for the bumbling honeybees, the flower's centre (where the nectar sits) flashes in a bright-red glow. Tests have shown that urban air pollution doesn't reach the nectar inside most plants because of the leaf structure around it that protects the core.

Besides an exemplary collective decision-making spirit, bee colonies have an anything-is-possible attitude. "Bees are opportunists", explains Camilla. "For them, London is a landscape which they can use as if they were in the countryside." While the number of hollow trees for swarming is slim in London, of course, it won't keep an urban bee colony from finding a lamppost, compost bin or attic, and settling there instead. Part of Camilla's job is to collect these swarms and give them a safe home in one of her beehives across London. "Just like some

animal activists who are fighting the extinction of tigers", Camilla says, "I am preventing an invaluable species from dying out".

So many of our plants and fruit-bearing trees depend on honeybees for survival. In the process of foraging from flower to flower, the hungry honeybee inevitably spreads pollen to other plants and fertilizes them. In fact, no other animal plays a more significant role in order for our ecosystem to carry on producing the fruit and vegetables that we consume on a daily basis. Insecticide use, intensified farming methods, the conversion of natural vegetation and climate change are all to blame for drastic declines in bee populations worldwide. We don't have to become professional apiarists, though, to do our bit to prevent their disappearance. Each of us can turn our gardens and balconies into an Eden for foraging honeybees, by planting with the seasons in mind and making sure that something is always flowering, whatever the time of year. Not only do wintery snowdrops, spring-time crocuses, summery sunflowers and autumnal ivy bushes brighten up our everyday – they also make these stripy urban dwellers one happy, busy bee population.



Each of Camilla's beehives produces a different honey, entirely unique in colour, flavour and taste. Spring-time honeys are usually very light, becoming darker and richer as the seasons evolve

