

# King Honey

*Noel Patterson has the restaurant community in Tucson abuzz with his hosted hive concept.*

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MECKLER

IT'S DUSK when I pull up to beekeeper Noel Patterson's bungalow located smack in the middle of downtown Tucson's Pie Allen neighborhood. Patterson leads me through the house to his fenced backyard. There are some handsome chickens that are fed spent grain from Hamilton Distillers, a funky garden with table and chairs, and, scattered around the perimeter, several wooden hive boxes.

Patterson has pioneered an innovative business model of hosted hives, where he partners with local restaurants to place hive boxes on their properties. Patterson provides beekeeping acumen; the partners split the costs and honey crop. Patterson has branded his honey as Dos Manos Apiaries.

As the sun sets, tinting the sky with a pink glow, streetlights switch on and we can hear the muted conversations of pedestrians headed to nearby restaurants. Friday night is coming alive. There's still a chill in the air, so he hands me a quilt to wrap around my shoulders as we talk outside; his black and white border collie mix Tilly nuzzles me.

"There are five restaurants right here in the 'hood, within [bee] flying distance from where we are right now," says Patterson.

This is a heavily traveled urban area, with the whistle of trains, birdsong, planes overhead, people talking, and occasional jackhammering. I ask if all the activity agitates the bees.

"I was initially concerned because bees don't enjoy being hassled," he says. "But my fears turned out to be unfounded. The bees aren't bothered." His in-town bees and those in other suburban Tucson locations are thriving.

Patterson says there a number of overlapping reasons why beekeeping has gone beyond the mere faddish: consumers are seeking authenticity in their food, a local connection, and a relationship with the person who produces it.

Though he's been gardening most of his adult life—he's 42—he only grew to love honey in the last few years. In fact, it was an ex-girlfriend who got him hooked on the liquid gold by gifting him with a hive on his 36th birthday.

"Making honey is a hobby that got out of control," he says with a laugh.

Patterson has a day job as a sales rep for Quench Fine Wines, a Chandler based company that sells local and biodynamically produced wines. Patterson markets his honey to many of the same restaurants and resort clients he sells wine to.

When, I wonder, will we taste the stuff? As if on cue, Patterson heads inside and reappears wheeling a small black suitcase that he's dubbed "his library."

"Honey is a sensual experience," he says, as he opens a Mason jar of buttercream-colored honey. The honeys range in color from straw gold to dark amber, labeled by year; he's got two years' worth in his collection. He sets down a plate of smoked almonds and assorted cheeses and cracks the seal on the first jar. Patterson eschews crackers or bread; he says the best way to eat honey is right off the spoon.

Before I put my tongue to the viscous substance, he encourages me to smell it. It's faint, but I can smell herbal notes. The taste? Creamy and light, buttery and delicious.

"It's like the first time you taste garden-grown tomatoes or farm fresh eggs with orange yolks," Patterson says of the sensory experience.

Turns out many of us have never tasted real honey; that stuff in the bear-shaped squeeze bottle doesn't count, as it's been heat-treated and filtered, which destroys flavor and quality. Naturally processed honey is opaque and will crystallize at room temperature.

Patterson, who's also worked as a sommelier, compares the terroir of honey to wine.

"Anything I've learned about wine applies to honey," he says. "Honey is an expression of place even more so than wine. Honey from different places tastes uniquely different."

Patterson opens the next jar, which is tawny in color. We agree that the monsoon honey is the best by a tasty measure and the most complex: an explosion of butterscotch and citrus notes on my tongue. I audibly moan, which may or may not be professional.

Patterson strokes his beard. He seems pleased.

*Honeycomb, bee's home: During the spring, each hexagon fills with sweet desert nectar, sourced on the wings of bees.*





*Desert bees, desert honey: Patterson has about 25 hives scattered throughout Tucson—including a few in more remote desert outposts.*

**P**ATTERSON HARVESTS HIS HONEY in June and July. He has hives in locations throughout Tucson, including on private property in the Tucson Mountains, near Catalina State Park and at Miraval resort. Time Market, Café Passe, Nox, and Goodness all have hives in the residential backyards of their owners.

It works like this: The person who wishes to sponsor a hive kicks in \$300 for the start-up costs, which include the bee colony and equipment; from there, Patterson takes care of the hives 100 percent. During the first year, there is no harvest; in year two there is a surplus. The hive host gets first dibs at honey, paying Patterson the wholesale price. In this way, he's able to supply the growing demand for honey and create a sustainable economic model of production.

"It's not a typical vendor/client relationship," says Patterson. "My partners are part of a local food system."

Peter Wilke is the owner of Time Market, The B Line, and Wilko; he's known Patterson for more than a decade and was the first to sponsor a hive. They often discuss local agriculture, swapping stories on who's producing what, from heirloom carrots to pasture-raised hogs. He says when Patterson starting keeping bees, the honey discussion was inevitable.

"I knew a few people with restaurants in San Francisco who kept hives in their

yards with spectacular results," Wilke says. "Noel launched a pilot program where a participant—me—would purchase the hives and the colonies, and he would manage them. The honey would be split 50/50. At this time, the work that I do is limited to eating a bunch of delicious honey. But we are planning to place four more hives on my property so there will be plenty of work."

Wilke adds that there have been other rewards.

"Honey production is like many things in life: when you take a deeper look it expands into a huge universe of wonder. One seemingly insignificant benefit is the mere witnessing of a bee crawling around on a citrus blossom in your yard. It is truly astonishing to taste honey from different parts of the hive that represent different blooms in the spring, and, then again, after the summer monsoon. All of the honey tastes different due to the flowers that are in bloom at that time."

Wilke likes playing a role in what he dubs "a miraculous process." And he's keen to share it with his customers.

"We have used the honey on various treats at Time Market, such as a house-made ricotta over toast with a drizzle of honey and fresh basil. Yum. With the increase in hives and production, we hope to offer the local honey in retail jars as well as in more menu items."

*"Honey production is like many things in life: when you take a deeper look it expands into a huge universe of wonder."*





*Patterson got into tending bees only six years ago, after receiving a hive as a gift for his 36th birthday.*

**I**T HASN'T BEEN HARD to find like-minded folks like Wilke who share Patterson's handcrafted-honey philosophy. In fact, potential hive hosts have reached out to him; word-of-mouth is the way he likes it. Partly because this is a part-time gig for him, he needs to keep the project manageable, and partly because he trusts that the folks who seek him out share his values.

"I'm working with people who get it," he says. "They buy heirloom turnips and radishes and farm-raised meats. They see the inherent value of high-quality ingredients. And they understand the environmental benefits." Patterson says that without bees as pollinators there would be no coffee, no blueberries, no oranges. The growing realization of the importance of bees in food production is why, he says, bee activism has emerged.

As new people sponsor his hives, Patterson can grow—to a point. Of course, the sites need to be suitable, which means there has to be enough forage—flowers with sufficient nectar—for the bees to harvest.

"There's an integrity in buying something directly from the person who produces it," Patterson says. "I'm growing honey in a way that reflects our regionality, our provenance. There's a lot of character in that."

An impressive list of eateries are supporters, including Pizzeria Bianco, Good Oak Bar, The Coronet, Exo Roast Company, Food for Ascension Café, Prep & Pastry, Renee's Organic Oven, and Café Passe. And he's got a waiting list.

Patterson is interested in creating monofloral honeys, which are comparable to a single varietal wine, which requires singling out enough of the bloom of one flower. It's not as easy as it sounds to find one thing blooming at one time, especially in Tucson, where 300 species of plants could be blooming simultaneously. He's focusing on mesquite, creosote, and acacia.

"It's a rare set of circumstances," Patterson says. "I have to find a unique ecological site, like the east slope of the Chiricahuas and be there at a specific time to harvest it. But, like wine, it will be the most complex and best expression of place."

Beyond the return on taste of beekeeping, there are other rewards.

"It gives me such satisfaction to have this kind of impact," he says. "Producing and sharing food creates community."

He pauses, then adds, "I wouldn't mind being the honey king of southern Arizona."

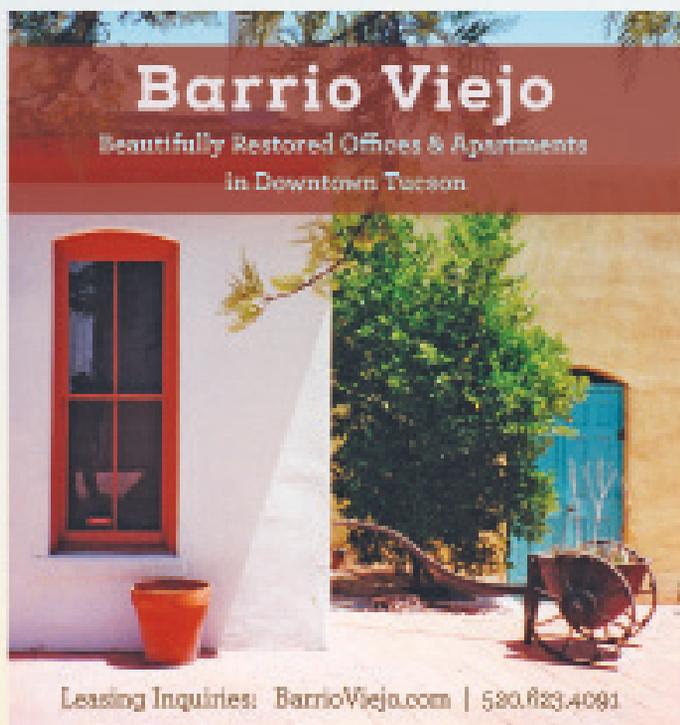
The crown may well be his. ♣

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*Suzanne Wright is a Cave Creek-based freelance writer.*

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