Island buzz

Tracey Sunderland and Vanessa Lewis take the ferry to Waiheke Island and find a hive of activity

STORY & RECIPES Tracey Sunderland
PHOTOGRAPHS Vanessa Lewis

An ominous hum tells us guard bees are on active duty as we approach the hives at Waiheke Honey Company. We'd rather they buzzed off, and owners Richard Evatt and Sheena Evatt-Wood know just how to persuade them: with billows of smoke from burning coffee sacks. The leftover hessian and jute sacks are collected from friends who have a coffee roastery, then dried in the sun until nearly falling apart and shoved into a bee smoker.

THIS PAGE
Leo, Lex and Richard Evatt check the hives.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Richard's hives are dotted all over Waiheke.

Through a screen of smoke and kitted out in beekeeping suits, we pass the now off-duty guards for a look inside the hives. The smoke has a calming effect on bees, which really helps when the hives are moved or monitored – a full 'honey super' weighs about 40kg, so it's quite a workout for Richard on big honey-processing days when agitated bees are the last thing he needs.

Later, we watch bees feasting on parsley pollen in the vegetable patch high above Palm Beach while we chat to Richard about the beekeeping life. When he and wife Sheena moved to Waiheke from the mainland over a decade ago, both still had jobs in Auckland. They enjoyed the daily ferry commute, with its bracing sea air and views. But they also had their young son Leo (now 14) in tow, whom they dropped off at a city-side childcare centre.

Unsurprisingly, Leo was less enthused about the island-to-city-and-back-again routine, and it didn't take long before Richard, an interior designer, decided it would be easier to look after their youngster on the island (a second son, Lex, now 10, arrived shortly after). Richard also decided to pick up a hobby, and started dabbling in beekeeping and experimenting with honey production.

Three years later, in 2010, he started the Waiheke Honey Company and has steadily expanded his business to a range of single-hive organic honeys. His honey is completely natural and raw, meaning it is unfiltered and not heated above natural hive temperatures (honey that has been heat-treated loses some of its enzymes and phytonutrients). Waiheke Honey Company honey is simply extracted from the hive, spun out by centrifuge and bottled. Their only filtering process involves pulling out any extraneous bits of bee and wax.

The hives are located all over the island and the Waiheke landscape and flora are key to the company's philosophy. Every queen is given a name by the owners of the property where the hive is located, and that name is printed on the lid of each batch of honey. Every jar reflects the coastal flowers and native bush on the island: from multiflora and native bush honey to clover, pohutukawa flower, kanuka and manuka.

The pure honeys are sold at the popular Ostend Market and from an old-fashioned honesty stand at the gate of their home on Hauraki Road. They also sell bee products on the Waiheke Honey Company website and courier them around the country.

Waiheke Island manuka honey is something special. This sought-after substance is sent

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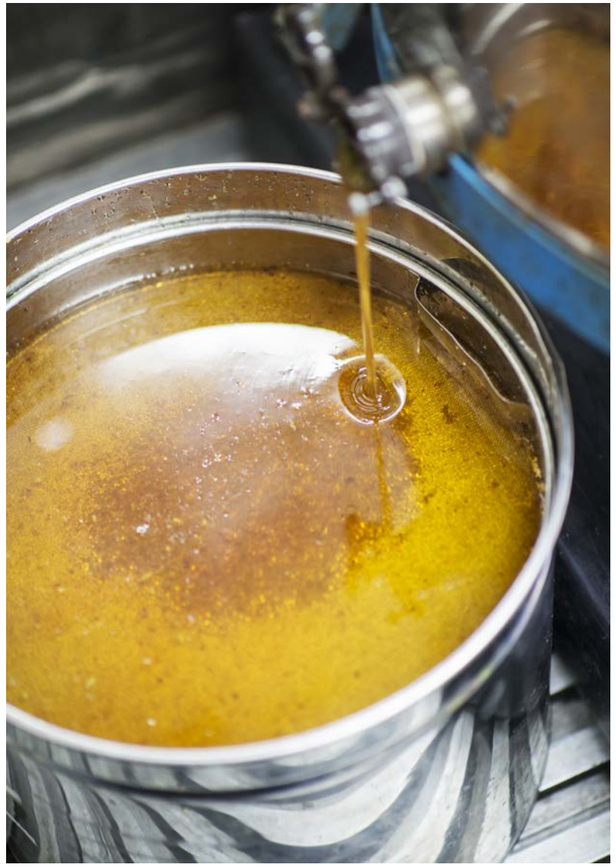
to a laboratory to have its non-peroxide activity and methylglyoxal levels measured. This process tests the antibacterial properties in manuka honey – the higher the methylglyoxal level, the more valuable the honey. The information is printed on the labels of each batch of Waiheke Honey Company manuka honey and the price adjusted accordingly.

The other special stuff honey bees create is propolis, or bee glue, a resinous mixture produced from collecting sap and resins. Propolis is used by bees as a sealant for unwanted spaces in the hive, but is also very useful to humans, as well as being extremely valuable. The family keep a little to use for treating wounds and also add it to their natural lip balms, which are made from leftover beeswax.

Spring is when bees work the hardest, collecting nectar so it can be converted into honey and stored as food inside the hive. Honey bees don't like wind or rain and will collect a lot more nectar on days that are 20°C or warmer; if conditions are blustery, they'll shut up shop and wait for a calm day. The amount of honey produced from season to season can fluctuate wildly depending on what kind of spring and summer we've had.

If the climate has been kind, then Richard collects the first honey harvest of the season in December. But he'll often continue into January and February, and even into March if the bees – much like their human neighbours – have judged their summer to be substandard.



Honey caramel almond slice

READY IN 1 hour
MAKES Around 35 pieces

Tracey: I learned this recipe as a young apprentice while training with Swiss and French pastry chefs. Pohutukawa or clover honey lends a delicate flavour to this simple slice.

SHORT PASTRY
1½ cups plain flour
100g butter, diced
¼ cup cold water

TOPPING
150g butter
¼ cup sugar
100g mild-flavoured honey
150g sliced almonds

1 Preheat oven to 200°C. Line a 30cm x 20cm slice tin with baking paper.
2 Place flour into a large bowl, add butter and rub into flour with your fingers until it resembles fine crumbs. Make a well in the centre, add the water, and mix with a butter knife until the mixture clumps together (add extra water if needed).
3 Tip pastry onto a floured surface and pat into a flat rectangle. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for 10 minutes in the fridge.
4 Roll out the pastry to fit neatly inside the slice tin – the edges of the pastry need to come 15mm up the sides of the tin. Place tin in fridge to rest pastry for a further 5 minutes.
5 Prick pastry all over with a fork. Place baking paper and baking beans on top and blind bake for 10 minutes until pastry is lightly cooked.
6 Remove the paper and beans, return to the oven and cook for a further 5 minutes until the pastry is lightly golden.
7 Place all topping ingredients except the almonds into a small saucepan. Bring slowly to the boil and simmer until the mixture thickens.
8 Add the almonds to the caramel mixture, stir through and pour over the warm base. Bake for 12-15 minutes or until the topping has set and almonds are golden brown. Let it cool down before cutting into thin slices or squares. Store slice in an airtight container.

COOK'S NOTE
Step 2 can be completed in a food processor. Simply pulse the flour and butter until it resembles fine crumbs, add water and continue to pulse until the mixture binds together.

Marinated sweet & sour carrot salad

READY IN 30 minutes plus marinating time
SERVES 4–6 VEGETARIAN GLUTEN FREE

This salad is a lovely, refreshing accompaniment to an autumn barbecue. Save the leftovers as the salad will keep for a few days chilled and tastes better the next day.

VINAIGRETTE

¼ cup olive oil
1 small red onion, finely sliced
1 tsp cumin seeds
½ cup cider vinegar
200ml tomato juice
½ tsp Dijon mustard*
1 tsp salt
¼ cup currants or raisins (see Cook's Notes)
⅓ cup raw honey (I used Waiheke Honey Company organic multiflora)

SALAD

500g baby carrots, green tips removed
400g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
½ cup roughly chopped fresh mint, plus ¼ cup extra to serve (a mix of plain mint and Vietnamese mint works well here)

1 To make the vinaigrette, pour oil into a small saucepan on medium heat. Sauté onion for 2 minutes, add cumin seeds and sauté for a further 2 minutes.
2 Add cider vinegar and remove from heat. Whisk in the remaining ingredients, except the honey (this is added at the end to preserve the natural goodness in the raw honey).
3 Scrub the carrots with a vegetable brush (there's no need to peel them). Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil. Tip in the carrots and blanch for 2 minutes. Drain into a large colander and refresh with cold water.
4 Using a very sharp knife, finely slice the carrot into thin lengths. Alternatively, use a peeling tool (see Cook's Notes) that produces thick slices. Place carrots in a large lidded container with the chickpeas and mint.
5 Stir honey into the vinaigrette. Taste and season with ground pepper. Pour vinaigrette over the carrots and chickpeas, cover and shake to coat. Refrigerate for a minimum of 2 hours, or overnight, so the flavours have time to mingle. Scatter with fresh mint to serve.

COOK'S NOTES

• If using raisins, roughly chop into smaller pieces.
• Slice carrots with a mandoline or special peeler – both can be found at kitchen stores.

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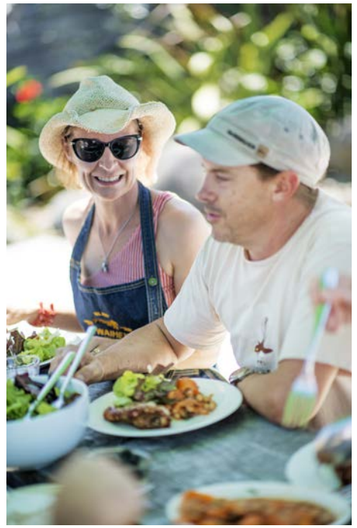

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE
Sheena Evatt-Wood, Richard and the boys enjoy an al fresco lunch at their Waiheke home with dishes incorporating some of their own organic honey.

Chinese chicken drums

READY IN 1 hour 30 minutes SERVES 4–6 GLUTEN FREE

Fourteen-year-old Leo's favourite dinner is Chinese chicken. This is sure to be a hit on any weeknight and leftovers are always popular in lunchboxes.

¼ cup kecap manis (Indonesian sweet soy sauce)*
2 Tbsp Waiheke Honey Company organic native bush honey (see Cook's Notes), or any strong honey
1 tsp Chinese five spice powder
3 cloves garlic, minced
3cm piece ginger, finely grated (see Cook's Notes)
2kg free-range chicken drumsticks, skin on
2 Tbsp sesame seeds, toasted, to serve

1 Preheat oven to 200°C. Mix kecap manis, honey, five spice powder, garlic and ginger together in a large lidded container or dish.
2 Toss in drumsticks, cover and gently turn over the container a couple of times to coat the chicken. Place in the fridge to marinate for 30 minutes.
3 Remove drumsticks from marinade and place in an oiled or greased deep oven dish. Roast the drumsticks in oven for 25 minutes. Turn chicken over to brown the other side and cook for a further 20 minutes, or until cooked through.
4 Serve hot, sprinkled with toasted sesame seeds.

COOK'S NOTES

• This recipe can be adjusted for different tastes. The Evatt-Wood family often toss homemade plum sauce and fresh or ground chillies into the marinade.
• These quantities can easily be doubled for a crowd of weekend visitors.
• Native bush honey is a single-hive, cold-pressed raw honey. The bees feed on native bush areas on Waiheke that are dominated by kanuka. The honey is dark and has a lovely caramel-butterscotch flavour.
• Sheena takes a rustic approach by not peeling the ginger before grating it on the fine face of a standard grater.

* Check label if eating gluten free