

A taste of honey really is

LOVE food? Me too. From grazing at the St Albans farmers market to dining out at the city's latest hot spots and picking up a freshly-baked loaf on the way home, I gobble it all up. But who have I to thank for filling my tummy with such fine, local fare? St Albans and the surrounding villages are jam-packed with top producers, and I'm determined to visit them all, join in the making and baking, and (above all) taste my way across the city.

Charlotte Morgan

I'M with Winnie-the-Pooh when it comes to honey. Whether it's slathered on thick white toast, swirled through a bowl of steaming porridge, or even paired with banana in a sandwich (trust me, it's great), we both can't get enough of the sweet stuff.

Luckily for St Albans fans, two local amateur bee-keepers, Andrew Copley and Peter Buckley, set up their own honey emporium at Carpenter's Nursery four years ago and it was there that I met the former one morning for an exclusive tour of the hives.

Andrew and his elder daughter Helena (also a dab hand at bee-keeping) had me change straightaway into a rather fetching bee suit – Andrew's warning that "sometimes



honeybees will sting through the fabric" did little to calm my nerves – and I completed the look with a pair of tight-fitting wellies and hefty gloves.

Copley & Buckley honey has half a dozen hives at Carpenter's, each one buzzing with up to 10,000 male drones (who do nothing

but mate with the Queen), 40,000 female worker bees (who do everything from cleaning the hive to collecting pollen) and one chart-topping Queen bee, who lays around 3,000 eggs a day.

I was quaking in my wellington boots at the thought of approaching such a swarm



(Above) Charlotte prepares by dressing for the occasion, (right) smoking out the hive before (far right) bringing out one of the frames to display the bees – all photos by Krishan Bhungar



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much sweeter than wine

– usually I run for the hills when a buzzing insect interrupts an al fresco lunch – but I put on a brave face and followed Andrew up to the hives at the back of the field.

Dozy bees bounced off my meshed visor as we approached, and I'm sure I felt a few try to burrow their way into my boots – it was a journalistic mission not for the faint of heart.

Call me mad, but I wanted to see inside a hive and so Andrew calmed the honeybees down with a puff of smoke from his hand-held smoker.

The bees, who understandably thought there was a raging fire outside, dashed inside the hive to fill up on honey, and because their abdomens swelled with all the eating, it made it very hard for them to flex their stinging muscles.

Good news for us beekeepers, and apparently it doesn't do the bees any harm either.

Andrew yanked one of the honeycomb frames out of the beehive and I almost sprang back in horror when I saw that it was

caked in hundreds of wriggling worker bees. It is they who mould point-perfect, hexagonal honeycomb out of wax, remembering to slant every cell at a particular angle to make them ideal for storing honey. It was a fascinating sight, and I was in awe of the bees as I watched them work.

Even the greediest of colonies couldn't possibly eat all the honey they produce, and so humankind has been collecting the leftovers from as far back as 10,000 years ago.

The ancient Egyptians, for example, used it to sweeten cakes and biscuits (and today, Delia Smith does a lovely honey and spice loaf) and, just as their ancestors no doubt did, the Copley family also go crazy for the taste.

As far as Andrew and Peter's honey goes, the spoonful I tried straight from the honeycomb is what you get in the jar. Nothing is added; nothing is taken away – all we did back at the Copley residence was lift the wax caps off with a capping fork, double-strain the honey, then spin the frames at super-

fast speeds to extract every last drop. Mess around with it too much, Andrew said, and it will start to taste like the generic, mass-produced honey that lines supermarket shelves (natural honey, by the way, never stays runny forever and will always granulate after a few days).

Team Copley – including Helena, 13-year-old Isabelle and nine-year-old Matthew – work together to fill and decorate each jar, and then it's straight back to Carpenter's Nursery farm shop to be put on sale. If you're keen on keeping that carbon footprint down, you'll be pleased to know that, from the location of the hives to Andrew's house and back again to the shop, Copley & Buckley honey travels only one food mile.

Notwithstanding the ever-constant threat of a sting, I enjoyed my time with the bees and left Carpenter's Nursery farm shop with new-found respect for our furry friends. There will be Copley & Buckley honey at my next picnic, and I certainly won't be swotting the bees away.

(Left) Charlotte shows off the finished product, two lovely jars of golden honey, and (below) burning wood chips for the smoker and (right), pointing out the honeycomb structure on one of the frames – all photos by Krishan Bhungar



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