



Maltese Islands and Local Honey History

Malta Üniversitesi'nden Dr. Adrian Bugeja Douglas tarafından yazılan "Maltese Islands and Local Honey History" isimli yazının Türkçesi 23. sayfadadır.

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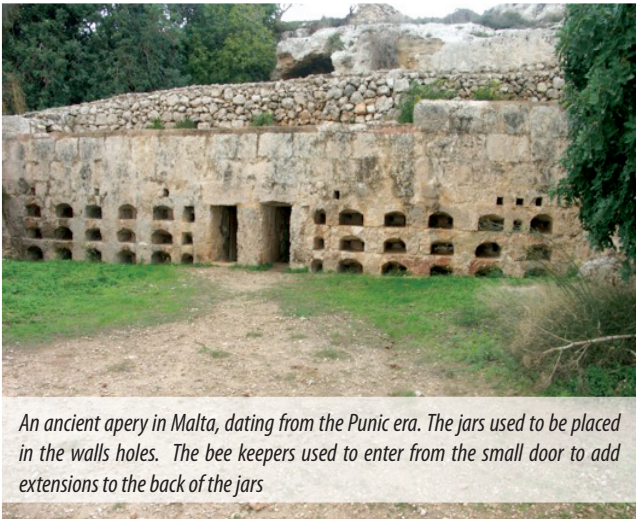
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The Maltese Islands have been renowned for the production of high quality honey, since ancient times. The Greeks called the island *Μελίτη* (Melite) meaning "honey-sweet," for the unique production of high quality honey in Malta. The name Melite was also used under the Roman rule. It was under the Arab rule that the name of Melite was changed to Malta.

Historical aspect

In ancient history, honey from Malta was considered as a delicacy and was also exported from the island. Research suggests that it was the Phoenicians who introduced the domestication of beekeeping in Malta. The Phoenicians brought the knowledge of apiaries and earthenware jars construction. In fact some Punic apiaries cut out in the rock still remain today. During the Roman rule of the Maltese Island Bee keeping continued and there is even the presence of Roman Beehives in Malta. Honey was very important to the Roman Empire and documents were discovered where people who stole honey were brought to justice. The Maltese Honey was renowned for its spicy and blended taste and hence was quite sought for in those days.

In the Maltese Islands, there are a number of sites and places which have names originating from the apicultural industry e.g.



An ancient apery in Malta, dating from the Punic era. The jars used to be placed in the walls holes. The bee keepers used to enter from the small door to add extensions to the back of the jars

"Wied il-Għasel" which means Valley of Honey and "Imġiebaħ" which means Aperies. These names from apiculture industry and the many ancient remains found around the island prove the abundance of the bee population and honey production on the Maltese Islands. In the countryside one can easily find apiaries called "Migbħa". These apiaries which date back to the Punic times are special buildings where the earth-ware jars were placed to rear the bees.

Earth ware jars, picture from the bottom of the jars. Here the combs are build perpendicular to the entrance of the jars. The bees enter from the other side of the jars where there are small holes. From this side extension can be added if the bees will be producing large amounts of honey

The traditionally method of rearing bees was done in cylindrical earth-ware jars (locally known as 'Qolla'). These jars, which were made from baked clay, were used to rear the bees. These types of jars were made of clay and had no bottom, and at their mouth they had a closure with small holes. The beekeepers normally used to lay the jars horizontally on the ground and under the carob or fig trees, with the narrow entrance facing south. The trees cover a good area of the ground and thus provided shade to these men made bee hives. Sometimes these jars were placed in niches of the country side rubble walls. However, beekeepers who owned fields, used to build apiaries in their fields. These were specially built rooms or caves where the jars were then placed in an opening in the wall, from where the bees could enter and leave the jars. At the back of the walls, where the jars laid, shelving was constructed so that the jars could be supported and also jar extension could be placed. These apiaries sometimes used to be rented to beekeepers from other locations

The rearing of bees up to the 1950s' was quite a natural process and little manipulation was carried out in these jars. In those days, when the beekeepers saw that the bees were developing and the hive has reached its limit, they usually added extensions to the jars so as to increase honey production. These were rings of clay about 12 inches long, without any bottom or mouths and were placed at the bottom of jar. Combs built parallel to the entrance were easy to cut. Combs built perpendicular to the entrance were difficult to



Earth ware jars, picture from the bottom of the jars. Here the combs are build perpendicular to the entrance of the jars. The bees enter from the other side of the jars were there are small holes. From this side extension can be added if the bees will be producing large amounts of honey

remove. When beekeepers used to see a jar with its combs being built perpendicularly, they tried to change the way the bees continued to build the combs. They used to cut a comb from another jar and place it parallel to the entrance, to encourage the bees to build combs parallel to the entrance. The beekeeper used to harvest the honey from the jars by cutting the combs till he met the combs containing the larvae.

The production of honey in the ancient was much less than the production of today. However, the production of honey rendered a lot of beeswax after the gathering of honey which was used for other purposes. In general, honey was gathered once a year after the wild thyme honey season. Beekeepers in the past used the religious Feast of St. Anne (26th July) as the honey gathering day.

The traditional techniques used in bee honey production started to change in the 50's as the first movable frame hives, and tools began to appear. The hives and tools needed were generally imported from Britain. The hives imported were copied and they were then produced locally. Till today the British Standard hive is quite common in Malta. The biggest drop in the use of jars was in the early 1990's when the Varroa mite was introduced in the Maltese Islands and eliminated about 2/3 of the entire bee colonies in the islands.

The Maltese Bee

The Maltese Islands have their own endemic bee species, called *Apis mellifera ruttneri*. This endemic sub-species of honey bee is known to have inhabited the Maltese Islands for centuries. It is a sub-species of the Western honey bee or European honey bee (*Apis mellifera*), and is different from other Mediterranean bees. Up till recent times it was the sole honeybee species in the Maltese islands. The importation of queens from Italy totally changed this situation and the local endemic species is hardly used any more. This happened after the devastation left by the Varroa mite that was found in the islands in the early 1990s.

About 2/3 of the local colonies (approximately 4000) were estimated to have been devastated by the Varroa mite at that time.

Characteristics of the Maltese Bee

The Maltese Bee is slightly smaller in size, dark in colour with apparently no yellow bands, and is resistant to certain diseases, but is viscous and highly active. Comparing the Maltese bee to the North African bee and the Sicilian bee, it results that it has shorter legs and wings. The wings of the Maltese bee are also much narrower. Also, when compared to other bee races, it has a very wide abdomen. The hair on its abdomen is also very long. After centuries of local colonization the Maltese bee has adapted well to the Maltese islands climate and environment. One particular biological feature of the Maltese queen bee is that it will keep laying eggs throughout the whole year. However before summer and in winter, the queen reduces the number of eggs laid and stores extra honey in the brood chamber instead. At the beginning of spring time and till autumn it again starts to lay eggs abundantly. By nature this subspecies is very defensive and can be aggressive sometimes.

However *Apis mellifera ruttneri* is a very productive bee as it can work on windy days and also during very hot weather. During the hot summer of Malta, when temperatures can get close to 40°C the bee tends to work early in the morning and in the afternoon till sunset while taking a short break during mid-day. It always stores enough honey for winter and sometimes there will be no need to supplement the colonies with bee candy or sugar syrup in winter. The Maltese bee has a tendency to swarm and when continually disturbed it will abscond the hive. This bee race also makes a lot of queen cells and a colony sometimes has more than one swarm. The Maltese bee defends the hive very well against other pests. Sometimes wasp nests are seen near the hives in a few metres distance away without offering any problems to the bees. From local bee keeper's observations, it cleans the hive very well and removes any foreign material promptly. Nevertheless the drawback is its aggressiveness; hence an interesting project is to breed a more docile strain of it.

Local Honey Production

The local honey is produced from different floral sources depending on the season and the location of the apiaries. In Malta beekeepers usually harvest three times during the year; the first harvest takes place in spring, the second harvest in summer and the third harvest in autumn.

The first type of honey that is harvested in the Maltese Islands is the spring multi-flora honey. This type of honey is gathered from many types of flowers that are present in spring time. It contains different kinds of pollen and nectar. In areas where clover is still grown, the honey bees gather nectar from this flower. Also when orange trees are present the bees gather nectar from the orange flowers. Although this is a multi-floral honey, sometimes the most significant plant flowers during this season are Red Clovers (*Hedysarum coronarium*), bore thistle (*Galactites tomentosa*) and starflower (*Borago officinalis*). This



Clover



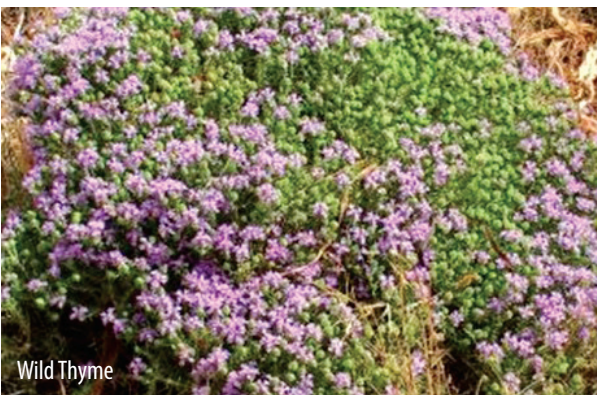
Bore Thistle



Male carob flower



Starflower



Wild Thyme

type of honey is collected during May and has the tendency to solidify in a few months (sometimes even less). Some people find it good against allergy and hay fever. When this honey is consumed regularly, it builds up the immune system against allergies. This is because; this honey is multi-floral and hence contains many different kinds of pollen which aid the body to build up the immune system to counteract allergies and heyfever.

The second type of honey that is harvested in the Maltese Islands is the wild thyme honey of summer. Wild Thyme (*Thymus capitatus*) is a shrub that starts flowering by late May in Malta. Wild Thyme grows on the Garrigue in the north of Malta and on the Island of Comino. The Garrigue is a type of low, soft-leaved scrubland found on limestone soils around the Mediterranean basin, generally near the seacoast, where the climate is not extremely hot, but where annual summer drought conditions persists. Wild Thyme has little purple flowers with a very strong aromatic scent. The nectar of wild thyme produces honey which has a very delicious and spicy taste. The summer season usually starts in the last week of May and ends between the end of June and the first week of July. This honey has been very famous since ancient times and is a type honey that is sought by both locals and foreigners.

The last season of Maltese Honey production is the autumn season. This honey season usually starts from the month of August and ends in November. By the end of August the bees start collecting nectar from the flowers of Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus melliodora*). This nectar gathering results in the build-up of the colony after it has slowed down by the high summer temperatures. If in September no heavy rain falls occur, the bees may continue to gather nectar from the Eucalyptus flowers during this month. After the flowers of this tree abate, the carob trees (*Ceratonia siliqua*) in October start to flower. The hives which by now have grown strong enough, the bees forage the carob flowers hence another type of honey is produced. Some bee keepers harvest the eucalyptus honey and then afterwards harvest the carob honey. Other bee keepers harvest only once in late autumn to produce a multi-floral honey made from eucalyptus flowers, carob flowers and some other flowers that the bees might finds in the beginning of autumn. Local tradition states that honey produced from carob is good for sore throats, and by people who smoke.

The historical unique attributes that have been assigned to the Maltese honey must be due to the vast range of wild flowers within the Maltese Islands. About 1000 species of mostly wild flora flowers are identified in Malta like; Wild Thyme, White Clover, Bitumen Clover, White Mustard, and Borage. The carob, citrus and stone fruit trees also help to give the honey a more special taste.

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