

The 'Buzz' Brothers: Harvesting honey in the San Bernardino Mountains

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Miles down a winding paved road, past dense thickets of chaparral, where pines sparsely dot partially balding hillsides, beekeepers Juan Aguilar and his brother Ramon park their pickup truck near a clearing of stacked green and white wooden boxes. At the base of each box, enter and exit honeybees.

"We're here for the lilac," Juan said. "It produces a really good honey with a strong floral flavor to it."

The brothers own and operate two beekeeping companies: Flores Honey and R.A. Apiaries. Over the last three years, they have managed a bee apiary — a collection of beehives — on the outskirts of Lake Arrowhead.

Access to California lilac, also known as buckbrush, is a rarity for most beekeepers, Juan said. But its prevalence in the San Bernardino Mountains means the brothers have a unique product on hand.

Juan Aguilar holds up a frame where bees have begun making their honeycomb.



Male bees, called drones, have one sole purpose: To reproduce. They do not forage for nectar.

(Photos by Zev Blumenfeld)

The green and white boxes, secured by a perimeter of low-lying electric fence, house 120 hives — a number which the brothers consider a smaller bee operation.

"We use an electric fence here for the bears," Juan said, gesturing towards the fence. "The first year we brought the beehives up here, the bears got into them."

The incident was far from an endearing Winnie-the-Pooh moment as each hive

costs upwards of \$200.

Near the fence, blue plastic barrels hold water that the bees will need to survive the hot summer. The barrels function as miniature reservoirs, keeping the colonies hydrated and focused on collecting nectar and pollen. The result is a more productive apiary.

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Ramon Aguilar (left) and Juan Aguilar stand in their apiary located in Lake Arrowhead.

UNDER THE LID

Each level of a hive is a single box. An opening at the bottom of the box is the only entrance and exit for the forager bees — bees aged 21 days and older whose job is to retrieve nectar, pollen and water.

The lower-level entrance facilitates upward growth, toward the top of the box. Once the hive is big enough, a second-level box will be added, giving the colony room to expand.

“The queen starts laying eggs on the top,” Juan said. “Once you’ve got a brood on the top, you can divide that colony into two. Then, you introduce a new queen to the second part of it.”

He pointed over to a tower of boxes.

“Sometimes we stack four or five boxes,” he said.

Inside each box are frames where the bees build their honeycomb.

When the colony gets divided, a new queen must be introduced. If a queen isn’t producing new offspring, then the colony will weaken, which leads to greater unpredictability in honey production.

“The more bees in a colony, the stronger it is, the better they feed the younger bees, the more nectar and pollen will be gathered,” Juan said.

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

Bee eggs can be either fertilized or unfertilized. Any fertilized egg is female and has the potential of becoming a queen. For three days, the bee stays in its egg. On the fourth day the “nurse bees” decide what to do with the egg.

If the bees decide to nurture the larva into a queen, they expand the cell of the comb. The larva will receive a strict diet of royal jelly — a nutritious substance Juan called “the milk of the hive.”

All other females work as nurse bees within the hive for their first 21 days. After this period, they become foragers.

The unfertilized eggs are males and are called drones. The sole purpose of drones is to reproduce. Juan said that immediately after mating with the queen, the drone’s reproductive organs explode, killing the male.

FLOWING IN HONEY

Juan and Ramon have been independent beekeepers for five and six years, respectively. Their brother-in-law introduced them to the industry.

“He would talk to us about beekeeping at family gatherings and we were curious about it,” Juan said. “I started with a few hives that I bought from him. Then I

began doing bee rescues.”

He said he rescued hives from places like barbecue pits and compost bins, after which Juan attempted to nurture the colonies back to full strength. Juan attributed the natural genetics of his rescued bees to fighting off mites and other potential problems like Colony Collapse Disorder — an abnormal phenomenon that occurs when most worker bees in a colony disappear and leave behind a queen, plenty of food and a few nurse bees to care for the remaining immature bees and the queen, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Although the brothers operate separate businesses, Juan and Ramon said they enjoy working together at their operations in Lake Arrowhead, Temecula and Orange County.

Each location yields unique honey dependent upon the flora available. The California lilac blossom honey produced in Lake Arrowhead tastes sweet before subsiding to a floral sapidity. In Temecula, Juan said, their bees draw nectar from wild sage and buckwheat, yielding light-colored honey with a mildly sweet flavor.

Bees in Orange County produce sweeter wildflower honey by using pollen and nectar from random flowers like milk thistle, pomegranate and mustard weed.

“We’re always looking for properties to keep our beehives on,” Juan said.

He encouraged property owners in the mountain communities interested in



Ramon Aguilar prepares a smoker, used to subdue the bees, before operating on his beehives. (Photos by Zev Blumenfeld)

hosting beehives to contact him.

Flat areas are most sought after as working on a slope is difficult. Both he and Ramon voiced interest in using wild sunflowers like the ones along Highway 18. Ramon said they’d love to find property at the base of the hill near Waterman Canyon.

Flores Honey products are available for purchase at Rustic Arts Cabin Outfitters in Running Springs and have been available at the Running Springs Farmers Market every Saturday.

“The honey sales have been slow, very slow,” Juan said. “But staying busy with the bees hasn’t.”

For more information about Flores Honey, visit www.floreshoney.com.



Bees dart around Juan Aguilar, owner of Flores Honey, as he reaches inside a hive.