

BeesOnline

It all started in 1999 with a single beehive and has now grown to become a multi award winning business. **CYNTHIA DALY** paid a visit to Maureen Maxwell at the hive of BeesOnline – the Honey Centre and Café (winner of the national Café of the Year Award) at Waimauku West Auckland.

From the road entrance BeesOnline Honey Centre and Café has a look of work about it. The architecturally designed purpose built centre packages honey products for sale while the café and retail area allow people to taste for themselves honey differences through product samples and food prepared with honey. The centre gives all ages a chance to understand the complete honey process from hive to jar. Children receive complementary facts and activity sheets, while cooking hints are available for adults along with Maxwell's cook-book "honey".

Maxwell, the queen bee, as she was referred to recently by a small boy visiting the centre, has a background in food and wine, with designer experience. She has been involved as a director/owner at Matua Valley Wines and the founder and original chef at The Hunting Lodge Restaurant.

"When the honey thing came along, it started as a hobby and I could see the potential in honey. It is an awesome product. It not only tastes good but its good for us and of course its good for the environment. It's kind of fun to be working with something that is a win, win, win situation. And it's about taking a product that's old in time and re-inventing it."

Maxwell explains that BeesOnline is about estate bottled honey where you take the traditional product, really concentrating on its unique characteristics, concentrating on quality and producing a very fine single flower product which is achieved through careful hive management.

With her wine tasting palate, Maxwell can pick up differences in the honeys and their regional differences.

"Very quickly as a chef I could see the potential of exploiting these differences for food."

Last year Maxwell wrote a book explaining how to use honey with different foods. And She has conducted training courses for chefs teaching them to recognise and use honey according to taste and required affect.

For instance, she says, a strong manuka is like an Australian dry red wine, it's mineral, it's earthy, it's metallic on the back of the tongue and its not even sweet. It is a very strong honey and ideal for marinates and savoury applications.

"It blends extremely well with things like chilli and garlic and all those strong flavours."

The other end of the scale, she says is pohutukawa and kauri, which are very sweet and floral like pretty dessert wines.

"So these are the ones you use in sweet desserts and baking. All the flavours, the colours, all the taste textures are all quite different and I can't understand why people haven't thought of it like this before. As a chef coming from the wine industry it's so obvious.

"When I discovered that a little worker bee in her entire lifetime harvests just one 12th of a teaspoon of honey. To me you don't want to waste this product, it's too precious so I marketed it in such a way that it gives value to the product."

As part of promoting the products and educating consumers about their use BeesOnline developed the café on an organic and sustainable sight, to show people exactly what they could do with honey. The next step has been to introduce seasonal and regional foods that reflect what is available but also to put a New Zealand stamp on the type of food.

"I look for things like bracken and manuka flowers in season for garnishing my platters, flax and things along this nature, whatever is in season as opposed to just bought in herbs. I have a huge interest in New Zealand native foods not only because they are indigenous to the Maori people but also what my ancestors ate when they first came to New Zealand."

Maxwell says the Café participating in the Monteith's Wild Food Challenge for the second year, has encouraged the staff to use June as a time to focus on indigenous local foods and use them on the menu.

"That gives us the opportunity to source and look into local foods that aren't perhaps commonly used and we educate not only ourselves but also our customers into what can be used. We also have our book of notes that explain about the menu, the particular ingredients, their botanical names and then if people want to look into it further we've got references that take them further. So it's not just about going out for a coffee. As well as the education aspect, Maxwell has considered the health value of the gardens at BeesOnline adding to the summer menu picnic boxes to eat outside. The menu even includes water and biscuits for customers' canine companions. **BO**



Maureen Maxwell



BeesOnline Honey Centre and Café