



Bee local

Costco's regional honey program is all the buzz

by MARK RAY



LIFETOUCH

Mark Ray fills this month's consumer reporter slot with this behind-the-scenes look at a Costco program. Email questions about this article to buyingsmart@costco.com.

Pick up a bottle of the new Kirkland Signature™ 100% Local Raw Unfiltered Honey, and you'll see just one ingredient on the label. (Honey, of course.) But there's more inside that bottle. Depending on where you live, you'll also find a taste of your own backyard.

Different regions, different taste

You might think all honey is created equal, but the pollen and nectar that bees forage for affect the finished product's color and taste. Orange blossom honey is light and tastes fruity, for example, while buckwheat honey is dark and has a malty flavor. Honey sommeliers—yes, they do exist—wax poetic about how a given honey has a slightly bitter start or a full body or a hint of cinnamon.

Costco had long wanted to offer a 100 percent U.S. product, and the buyers decided to take it one step further. “We realized what our members really want is not just 100 percent U.S., but something that's more local: Washington honey, Florida honey, Great Lakes honey,” says Lucas Stanuch, corporate foods and sundries buyer. “Our Kirkland Signature honey has always been fully traceable, arriving segregated by origin and beekeeper. With this level of traceability, we realized it was fully possible to develop an extensive local honey program.”

The result is honey originating from multiple suppliers across the United States. “If your state produces a lot of honey, such as California, you'll find its name on the label. Otherwise, your



Keeping track of every drop, from bee to bottle.



honey will be a regional or U.S. blend. Alabama doesn't produce a lot of honey, so our Alabama locations might have a Southeast blend with honey from Florida and Georgia," Stanuch says. "The Northeast region produces honey, but not enough to supply all the Costco locations in that area, so we're going to have a regional blend for them that is 100 percent U.S."

Local hives

One of Costco's suppliers is Rice's Honey in Greeley, Colorado, whose Local Hive™ brand has been available in many Costco warehouses for the past five years. L.R. Rice launched Rice's Honey in 1924 by selling honey door to door. Closing in on 100 years of being in business, the

company still prides itself on selling raw, unfiltered honey—with nothing added, nothing removed—to preserve the nutrients that make honey more than just a sweet treat.

According to CEO Tony Landretti, Rice's Honey works with more than 200 beekeepers across the United States.

"We run the whole spectrum from small, family-run, mom-and-pop operations all the way through commercial beekeepers," he says. To ensure quality, Rice's tests every truckload in-house for attributes like color, moisture, pH value and viscosity, and contracts with third-party labs that confirm the presence of the right pollens and the absence of adulterants like corn syrup, which can appear in some imported honey.

Under the new local honey program, Rice's will supply warehouses in Texas, the Pacific Northwest, Colorado, Utah and Southern California, where members will find Landretti's favorite, SoCal honey. "It has a bit of a citrus note to it, and I like the lighter, sweeter honey," he says. "I'm from Wisconsin originally, and I've lived in Colorado for almost 20 years, but that's my favorite."

Speaking of favorites, Landretti says Costco is one of his favorite retailers to work with. "They're very collaborative. Their buyers are very educated and very fair. They understand manufacturing; they understand ingredients; they understand quality. They're always working with their suppliers to provide the best for their members. I appreciate that as a Costco member, and I appreciate that as a supplier," he says. ■

FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Besides the new local honey, Costco continues to offer Kirkland Signature Pure Clover Honey, a blend of U.S. and Argentine honey, and Kirkland Signature Raw Organic Honey Bears, which use honey imported from Brazil, due to very limited availability of organic honey from the U.S.—MR



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Flight of the honeybee

To make a single pound of honey, bees fly more than 55,000 miles—equivalent to more than two trips around the Earth—and visit 2 million flowers. In fact, a pound of honey represents the life's work of more than 750 bees.

The honey is made so bees have a food source, even when plants are not blooming. Beekeepers help remove any excess supply, a mutually beneficial process recorded as far back as an 8,000-year-old Spanish cave painting.

Honey begins as nectar, some of which worker bees digest for

energy and some of which they deposit in a special second stomach. Back at the hive, other bees deposit that nectar into honeycombs. The rapid flapping of the bees' wings partially dehydrates the nectar, creating the sweet, sticky substance we call honey.—MR