

JUDGING HONEY-- IN THE JAR
or How the Judge looks at Honey in the Jar
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(revised 2003 by Margaret Davies)

There are now several books and booklets available on exhibiting and judging bee produce but the most comprehensive book available is "Producing, Preparing and Judging Bee Produce" by the late Wm. Herrod-Hempsall, but only a small proportion of those who keep bees exhibit the produce of the hives at the relatively small number of honey shows that take place up and down the country. More might do so if they were aware of what the judge looks for in his examination of the various exhibits on the show bench. In this article an attempt will be made to show what takes place.

Within the scope of this article it will only be possible to deal with two types of exhibit - bottled honey, liquid extracted and crystallised or granulated. (Heather honey will also be dealt with.)

The classes covered by extracted honey are light, medium and dark in the liquid form and natural crystallised and soft set in the crystallised or granulated form.

Liquid Honey Classes

When the judge commences judging he or she will pick out the lightest liquid honey class on his or her list, i.e., if there is a light, a medium and a dark class to judge they should start with the light because the exhibits will be of a more delicate aroma and taste, thus their palate will "deteriorate" more slowly and the taste buds' reaction remain alert throughout judging.

Every judge should be accompanied by a steward whose job it is to assist the judge in every way bar judging. They must see that the judge has the normal requirements for judging. For example, water for washing the tasting rods -- glass rods for removing samples of honey from each jar. The steward will fetch and carry, advise the judge on details in the schedule, especially on the rules governing the honey show and the classes, although the judge will already have familiarised himself or herself with the regulations. Further they must await the instructions of the judge as to the loosening of lids on the jars, etc.

The judge will begin by looking along the showbench for those first rejections among the exhibits, having first selected the equipment needed to make the examinations, several honey tasters in a small container of water, a torch, and a set of grading glasses to check that the honey is in the right class.

Normally the Show Secretary will advise exhibitors, particularly beginners, if they are uncertain as to the class they should be showing in. However it is not uncommon for the judge to reject an odd exhibit or two for being in the wrong class. Next the judge will begin the close examination of each exhibit.

If the schedule requires that each jar should be labelled 1.5 cms (1/2 in) from the base of the jar this should be approximately as stated but not absolutely crucial. The containers themselves must match in each exhibit and the contents must also match. It is no use having one jar of honey one colour and tasting of one thing and the other, or more if requested for the class, somewhat different. Nor is it permissible to exhibit in odd types of jar. If the schedule is for squat type jars, then they must be squat jars of the same design and shape.

For the next operation the judge will most likely have to use the torch, especially if the hall or marquee is unlit. Each jar is removed from the bench in turn and closely scrutinised. The judge is looking for what is generally called "extraneous" matter, that is, anything in the honey that should not normally be there.

It often happens that very small pieces of material detach themselves from the straining or filter cloth and, if so, these will be suspended in the honey. Likewise a hair, minute pieces of wax that have become broken up during extraction, and the filtering process has failed to remove during bottling. If any of these things are present a strong light will reveal them and in doing so the judge will in all probability reject the exhibit because the first tenet of showing is cleanliness and hygiene. During this part of the examination the judge will also be looking for the first indication of crystallisation in the honey should it be there. This is revealed in a very fine cloudy, or smokey appearance and will be described by the judge to any who may ask as incipient granulation.

As the class calls for clear or liquid honey, and the smoke haze of minute crystals or worse will very soon bring about crystallisation in the exhibit, the honey judge will have to reject it. Honey with a high imbalance of dextrose to laevulose is therefore not a good one for the liquid honey classes. An example of this, of course, is Rape Honey.

The external examination of the exhibits is now almost complete and rejections or otherwise made on an examination of each item in the exhibit i.e., if two jars compose the exhibit, then both jars are examined. The judge will also take into account lids and should there be any rust the whole exhibit will be rejected.

Once more we return to the need for cleanliness which is the keynote of all food preparation.

All exhibits in the class that have stood up to the first tests are the now about to have their final examination, the judge having already briefed the steward to loosen the lids of those still remaining in the contest.

It is important, of course, that lids shall only be loosened **not** removed. The judge then carefully lifts each lid in turn and sniffs closely the surface of the honey for any aroma, which in the case of light honey should be very delicate. It is at this juncture too that a little of the honey is removed on the end of one of the tasting rods after it has first been wiped free of any water. The sample of honey is transferred from the rod to the forefinger of the left hand (to the right hand if a left-handed person) and thence to the mouth for tasting.

As already explained the taste should match the aroma, light and delicate for light honey, more perceptible for medium honey and more distinct in dark honey, but at no time should there be any unpleasant taste which can come about from a variety of things such as contact with products of pronounced odour, the use of strongly tainted products for cleaning the jars, or it sometimes occurs that the bees themselves introduce unpleasantly tasting honey into the hive from some floral sources an example of which is ragwort. Nor should the honey, on being swallowed following the tasting, cause a tickling or burning sensation at the back of the throat.

Liquid honey, whether light, medium, or dark, should be bright and clear. If it is dull looking and is not in the incipient granulation stage then it could very well contain an admixture of honeydew. Such honey has no place on the showbench.

Having made a number of rejections of exhibits for one reason or another the judge will begin the task of placing the remaining exhibits in a rough order of merit from left to right always having at the back of his or her mind the various criteria which have already been mentioned, but with the addition of finally paying attention to the density of the honey.

Honey should not be so thin that it falls rapidly from the tasting rod when sampled or so dense that it forms a "ball" on the tongue when tasted. The first is usually a sign that the moisture content of the honey is too high and it is likely to be "unripe" and therefore liable to ferment in storage, and in the other instance the exhibitor may have over-processed the exhibit to obtain brightness and reduce the water content.

Lightly touching the surface of each exhibit in turn the judge carefully watches the small "pyramid" of honey raised as the rod is withdrawn return to its normal level. From this exercise an experienced judge can usually tell a good honey from a poor quality one. Comparing one jar against another and also doing further taste sampling, and also taking into account such details as general get-up, clean jars with clean screw threads, new bright lids with clean inner surfaces and threads (a little fresh honey on the lid due to travelling will not detract from the exhibit), honey surface free of dust and wax particles, and finally the presence or not of air scum or froth which usually forms a fine ring around the surface and on the outer edge of the honey, the prize winning exhibits take shape.

Granulated or Crystallised Honey

Nowadays shows usually carry two classes for granulated or crystallised honey - natural set and soft set, the latter has come about as a result of public demand for the latter over the former.

Because cleanliness plays its part in the preparation of all honey the judge starts by carefully examining the bottom of each exhibit, for dust and other extraneous matter will usually be present in this area if the exhibitor has failed to check his glass or honey before filling the jars.

Frosting caused by the presence of air trapped between the side of the jar beneath the shoulder and the honey, if unsightly, will reduce the exhibit's chances of a prize although the honey may be excellent in other respects. Frosting is more likely to occur in natural granulated honey than soft set depending, of course, on its preparation.

Next the judge will be looking for a honey with a relatively fine grain. A rough, coarse grained honey is not to be recommended.

The honey in the exhibit must be uniform in colour. A pale straw colour is preferred to dark, brownish or greenish shades.

Within the jar the judge tests for fermentation by smell and the tell-tale moist bubbly appearance on the surface of the honey. The surface should be absolutely dry and firm with perhaps the hint of whiteness.

Flavour of course will be taken into account by the judge who will secure a small sample of honey from the very edge of the exhibit and not by carving a relatively large hole in the very centre so that the exhibitor cannot offer it to another show.

Finally, the judge will set out the prize winning exhibits in order as with liquid honey checking off the list with the steward.

Soft Set.

The procedure as for natural set honey is followed out precisely

except that the judge will expect each exhibit to be quite firm but have the consistency of butter when first removed from a refrigerator. It should also be free of air bubbles and scum often produced in exhibits of this kind through the exhibitor following instructions to beat honey to produce a soft condition. This is neither right or good for soft set granulated honey as the excess air introduced into the honey by such a process leads to an unsightly exhibit and later on to fermentation.

Heather Honey (*Calluna vulgaris* - Ling)

Pure Ling honey carries a slightly bitter-sweet taste, is a reddish dark amber colour, has a very distinct aroma of heather flowers, should be free of any granulation and be gelatinous (usually referred to as thixotropy).

The purer the sample of heather honey the more thixotropic it will be, often tested by the judge turning the exhibit on its side whereupon the honey will stay firmly in place for some minutes or fall more quickly away when the sample is less pure. The judge will also test the thixotropic nature of the exhibit by drawing the tasting rod through the surface when it will become quite liquidly runny but reform firmly shortly afterwards.

Whilst exhibiting a bright appearance, heather honey, unless it has been heated, will not be clear and should have an even distribution of air bubbles trapped in it from pressing. These should be of a reasonable size, not too large otherwise they detract from and not enhance the appearance of the exhibit as they should. Heather honey tends to darken with age.

A lot of heather honey that appears in honey shows these days is centrifuged from the comb and also heated. It lacks much that pressed heather retains.

Bell Heather (*Erica cinerea*)

Is not gelatinous, has a less stronger flavour than true heather, is the nearest to port wine in colour, varies in its brightness and often is a little on the thin side in density.

In judging it the judge follows a similar comparative test to that given to liquid honey.

Commercial Classes

In classes that incorporate honey labelled 'as for sale' the judge will check the labels to ensure that they comply with the current regulations, including lot numbering.

Finally, with every class of honey the judge, having made his awards, checks each complete winning exhibit for any possible faults overlooked in the preliminary stages and very occasionally has to reappraise the outcome - but very rarely.

Secondly, every exhibitor who enters a show will have all their exhibits examined by the judge and will usually get an explanation from the judge why any particular exhibit failed to do well if they so require it.

Thirdly, any show staged under National Honey Show or B.B.K.A. rules makes provision for only one prize per exhibitor in each class. This is achieved by the judge prejudging any group of exhibits put in the one class by an exhibitor. It is considered a fairer way of dealing with exhibitors who could sweep the board in a class with exactly the same honey put up in a number of exhibits.

And very finally please understand that the outcome of any class is the judge's preference for a particular honey and not necessarily the unanimous verdict of a group of judges, although it will be found that prize-winning exhibits travelling around the shows attract similar prizes from a variety of judges.