



Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:

The nectar of the Greek Olympians – Honey (from Crete)
Apiculture (beekeeping) has a long tradition on Crete!



Based on Greek mythology ARISTAIOS ¹⁾ instructed humans in the beekeeping. He learned the beekeeping by the Nymphs, with which he raised up. The bee MELISSA nourished, according to the mythology, the young Zeus on Crete; furthermore the bee is the holy animal of the fertility goddess DEMETER. The priestesses of the Greek goddess ARTEMIS were called “bees”. The expression MELISSA (honey) probably harks back on king MELISPOS of Crete or on his daughter. Therefore the mythology shows the fact that the beekeeping on Crete must have a very long tradition.

However it is difficult to date it historical. As one of the first ARISTOTELES (384 - 322 B.C.) was occupied with the study of the bee colony and got rid of the opinion that bees originate from dead bulls. To the most impressing excavation finds on Crete belongs the gold jewellery of Malia (from Minoan time; 15. Cent. B.C.), on that two bees are shown (see image). Also on boards with linear “B” - writing, the oldest form of the Greek language, honey (“Meli”) is mentioned. This points to the fact that the same word is used on Crete since 3.500 years and that the product honey (Greek “Meli”) derives from the word bee (Greek “Melissa”).



For thousands of years there was a special kind of bees on Crete (*Apis mellifica*), known for its excellent quality of honey and therefore mentioned by many writers of the antique. Even today the Cretan honey is still internationally recognized as one of the best kinds of honey. It is very aromatic and has a colour variation from gold-yellow to dark colour with a golden glow. It receives its special aromatic characteristics from the plants and herbs of the island. Thus the beekeepers of Crete are endeavour to set up the bee boxes/baskets in areas which are rich at blooms, herbs and aromatic plants.



The choices of location for the bee boxes are exclusively areas with many herbs and bloom-rich plants (image left); it is decisive for a qualitatively good and aromatic honey. The image in the middle and right show a beekeeper at the “honey harvest” in Rodakino/South Crete. In some areas the beekeepers are “specializing” their bee colonies in special herbs frequently occurring in an area, like e.g. the “thyme honey” of Sfakia in the south of Crete.



The practical exercise of the beekeeping for honey production takes place on Crete like everywhere. To the producer of the honey - the **bee** – hereafter a few more sentences: If a bee approaches a bloom, it takes up the nectar (honeydew) with its proboscis and transports it into the “honey sac”. It serves as reservoir for the nectar. However nothing is “digested” but kept only. Just a tiny quantity of their “booty” is needed for itself. It drags the largest part home. About 20.000 times a bee must fly out, in order to collect a litre of nectar, which results in approximately 300 gram honey. Already during the flight the bee extracts water from the collected nectar. Arrived at home, the de-watering continues in the honeycombs. By strong wing vibrating a part of the bees let waft air over the honeycombs, in order to vaporise still more water. In addition the nectar is relocated several times by the bees. It is enriched with body-own materials, which promote its maturing. If the honey is “mature”, the bees lock the cell with a wax cover. The indication for the beekeeper: the honey harvest can begin!

However bees are not only useful to humans. ALBERT EINSTEIN already recognized how important bees are for our flora and fauna: “If the bee disappears from the earth, then humans will live only for a few years; no more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more humans ...”

¹⁾ Son of the god APOLLO and the Nymph KYRENE; is believed to be the “inventor” of beekeeping and, among other things, as first promoter of the Olive tree.

Honey as alimentary- and cure

Honey is an alimentary, which can be easily assimilated. Except the natural sweeteners it contains many more materials (over 180), which are very useful for a balanced nutrition. The anti-oxidizing materials, which the honey contains, help the human organism to repel pollutants. In the naturopathy for example, it is used as wound dressing and acts, because of its high sugar content, slightly antiseptic and reduce dead tissue in wounds.



Honey today is defined by EU standards and, for the improvement of the production and marketing in the European Union, in 1997 the council issued the regulation (EEC No. 1221/97 and EEC 2300/97), which supply also usable information to the consumer. So distinguishing features: style of production (extracted honey, comb honey), botanical origin (sorts: e.g. Thymus honey), regional origin (e.g. honey from the Lassithi Plateau), topographic origin (e.g. Mountain bloom honey) and geographical origin (e.g. Cretan honey) are important notes for the certificate of origin, production and quality.

In the traditional Cretan nutrition honey finds a versatile use. Cheese with honey for example is a common dessert of the inhabitant in the cattle breeding regions. Yogurt with honey is well-known nearly everyone, like also different patties with honey. Highly delicate are walnuts with honey, a candy which is served to the bridegroom and the bride in the church during the wedding in some regions of Crete. This probably has a symbolic character (so that living together becomes “sweet”). One gives honey also to traditional hot beverages or uses it as spread. In some regions of west Crete one eats still today meat with honey.

Pictures: (2) U. Kluge / (2) H. Eikamp (05/2005)