



A JAR FULL OF HONEY

Aggiunti molti obiettivi, oggi mieli thun lavora per dare voce e forza crescente alla sua idea, per promuovere i valori che porta in seno e nell'anima, al fine di coinvolgere nuovi estimatori e onorare tutti coloro che hanno dedicato la propria vita professionale alla nobile arte dell'apicoltura."

—ANDREA PATERNOSTER

Tasting gives us a possibility to take more time to explore our senses, to celebrate differences, acknowledge diversity of “a single ingredient” and embrace the complexity that occurs when we experience our active sensibility. In this essay I will try to explore my favorite ingredient –honey– as a sensorial and cultural experience based on the different encounters I have had with beekeepers, honey sensory analysts and, of course, our encounter with Andrea Paternoster. Towards the end, I aim to shape an inspirational future of my honey journey based on these encounters and through the ecological-participatory approach Nicola Perullo proposed on his natural wine flight.

Tasting Italian Honeys

A jar full of honey captures time, space, biodiversity, care and appreciation. These golden shades represent nature’s pure alchemy between blooms and bees, and the love from those who keep them. Such is the case of Andrea Paternoster, our honey guide in this journey, whose passion for bees, flavours and poetry convey in a wonderful project that goes beyond quality & specialty honey: Mieli Thun.

In the growing world of honey enthusiasts, which I have been a part of for the past 5 years, this ingredient is often compared with wine, aiming to explain the relationship between the soil, the flowers and the flavors that honey carries, beyond its common and obvious description of sweetness. Andrea confirmed this trend, he stated that he took inspiration from the passion he perceived in farmers around Trentino who grow grapes with absolute care in order to transform them into top quality wine, labeled and sold both in Italy and abroad. In a totally different setting, this comparison can also be perceived in a professional honey sensory analysis training, where every sample is served in glasses of wine in order to allow the taster sink her / his nose and perceive fully all the aromas each honey varietal has. If wine can reflect a gift from a specific territory, why honey cannot share this story of terroir, biodiversity and flavour from the flowers? This question has been crucial for my personal research, and a key point to start a journey as

a honey taster. Moreover, the idea of using taste as a tool to create meaningful experiences and awareness is what brought me to Pollenzo.



Honey Sensory Analysis Training, CREA, Bologna. October 2019. Instructors: Raffaele Dall'Olio, Gian Luigi Marcazzan

Italian honeys are known worldwide for their uniqueness in flavours, colors and textures, for their 40 monofloral honeys studied with a multidisciplinary scientific perspective –20 of them are classified and recognized by the Ministry of Agriculture–¹. This level of specialization started just around the 80's, with the vision of a Ligurian beekeeper and the knowledge of a French enologist, Michelle Gonnet, the first attempt to create a honey vocabulary was born.²

In Italy there is a long tradition of honey sensory analysis. The first honey sensory analysis course was held in 1979. In 1988 an Italian National Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey was founded and it was officially recognized by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture in 1999. The Italian National Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey is the body that ensures the validity of qualitative assessment and opinion on the botanical origin of honey provided through sensory analysis. The Register guarantees an adequate and uniform professional base for the members and their qualification to be part of official tasting groups.³



Massimo Carpintieri in his Laboratory. Asti. June 2020

I have been very lucky to have the opportunity to explore Italy through its honeys before our tasting class with Andrea. On the one hand attending two levels of honey sensory analysis training with the Italian Register –in a formal environment–; on the other, visiting some producers in Piedmont –a very practical approach–, where I met Massimo Carpintieri, the president of the Slow Food Presidia *Mieli di alta Montagna*, who has been an active part of the transformation and professionalization of honey in Italy since 1973. This encounter was very special because of Massimo's personal journey –an inspirational example– transitioning from a young beekeeper who sold sweet honey, to a specialist and promoter of flavours across a range of different honeys linked to flower diversity.⁴ He assures that when young people join a different

sector –in this specific case Michel Gonnet– they bring with them innovation, and this was a life changer for Italian beekeepers who became honey experts, and are considered the best in the world today.⁵

Almost as a serendipity happening, Massimo's words helped me experience the encounter with Andrea Paternoster differently. Both his father and grandfather were apple producers and hobbyist beekeepers, so from a very young age he encountered his passion for bees and started the *Mieli Thun* journey in 1995 with



Honey Tasting Class: Andrea Paternoster Pollenzo.
October, 2020

a clear objective: valorizing honey through beauty and pleasure. He brought his young creative vision into the world of specialty honey aiming to change the perception of this ingredient, shifting from a healthy product –common perception of honey–, to a wide diversity of flavours, colors and aromas –already described in the honey wheel by the Italian National Register of Experts in the Sensory Analysis of Honey–, to an ingredient of joy, pleasure and creativity in the culinary world that opens the box of opportunities and explorations.

Pleasure transforms mere passivity into active sensibility, into perception: the awareness and voluptuous abandonment to the pure *material substance* of a food lead to an upheaval that promotes the psychophysical process of active life, identity and language.⁶ And in this

case, Andrea's quest for pleasure has been key point to bring honey to a different narrative level, both in his storytelling and aesthetics by placing every jar *all'altezza del cuore*, as well as in the experience of tasting different flavours and aromas in each one of the 12 honey samples we tasted –as well as mead, acquavite and pollen– linked to a special understanding of the flavours in a composed dish.

In common vernacular and in some expert practice, and from the distant past to the present, the notion of taste tends to fold together olfactory and gustatory experiences. In more rigorous terms of technical art, the term flavor is meant to encompass both olfaction and gustation [...] but also chemical and temperature senses, the tactile sense, vision, [...] and the role of memory, the emotions, prior beliefs and expectations.⁷

I could easily melt in these words describing my gustatory experience of flavours, both of the honeys and surprises Andrea brought to expand our curiosity around this ingredient, and by visual immersion in the classroom setting, with two beehives –a Langstroth beehive and a traditional clay covered skep hive– but I rather set this aside for another conversation and use these last lines to reflect on the connections, questions and inspirations I found for the work I do with my honey project back in Mexico.

Final thoughts

Four years before coming to Pollenzo I realized, brainstorming with some friends, how important it was to do honey tastings as a tool to promote local consumption, enhancing the positive environmental and social impact. My approach was very open and improvised, since I have never attended to one before nor had any training as a honey sensory analyst. Those tastings started gaining some popularity amongst my friends and their friends, so the bubble slowly started to grow. At

this point I realized that my knowledge regarding honey and taste relied purely on my empirical experience, so I started to dig into blogs and books that led me to formal training in Bologna and later to apply for UNISG.

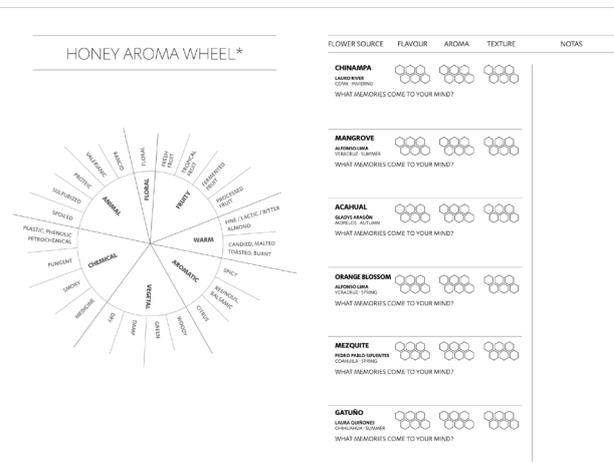
I want to share this path, because that formal training put me inside a box of a “specialist” who forgot the playful and free approach when it comes to tastings. I became very technical and, somehow, lost my voice. Luckily, this year in Pollenzo has been pure honey to my thoughts, encountering different approaches to tasting boosted my creativity with different ideas to talk about honey, bees and beekeepers. It is clear that Andrea’s approach will have an impact on my project, nonetheless I would like to highlight Nicola Perullo’s creative approach to *epistenology*, through embodied senses, use of different languages, appealing to emotions through wine, music, enquiry and a beginner’s mind. Once we overcome the fear and discomfort of losing objectivity, finally we can consider the nature of what we are putting inside our bodies.⁸

Aiming for this discomfort to *unlearn* my objective scientific knowledge based on the honey aroma wheel, and the joy of discovering through curiosity the substantial tastes and experiences of honey, I have been practicing different ecological encounters with my italian honey library, that of course includes some from Mieli Thun (*Tarassaco* and *Coriandolo*), Massimo, as well as the 20 scientifically studied by the Italian Ministry, two Piedmontese Slow Food Presidium (*Alta Montagna* and *Tarassaco*), and a couple of honey gifts from Germany, Denmark, Sweden, France and Madagascar.

I am very keen to go back home to perceive –with mindfully embodied senses– the variety of mexican honeys I have been exploring for these past few years, to encounter fully each spoonful; to experiment with pairings like Andrea did, moreover to explore with different audiences, settings, and narratives to create a personal voice as a honey enthusiast.



Improvised Honey Tasting by honey enthusiast (2017), and revised tasting guide (2019). Mexico City.





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